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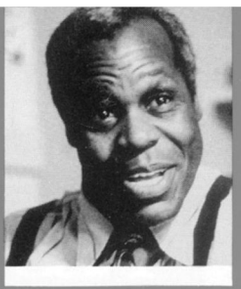

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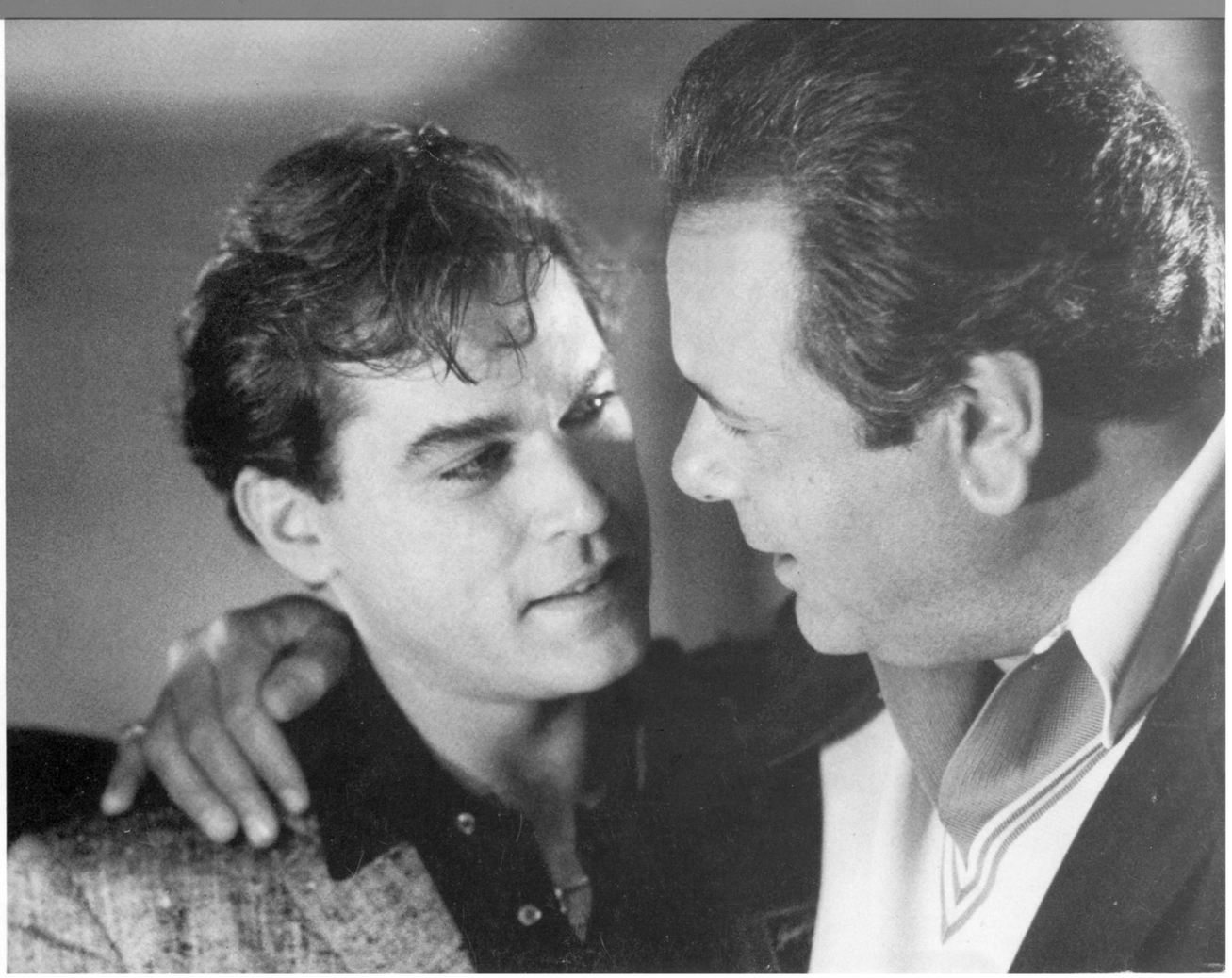

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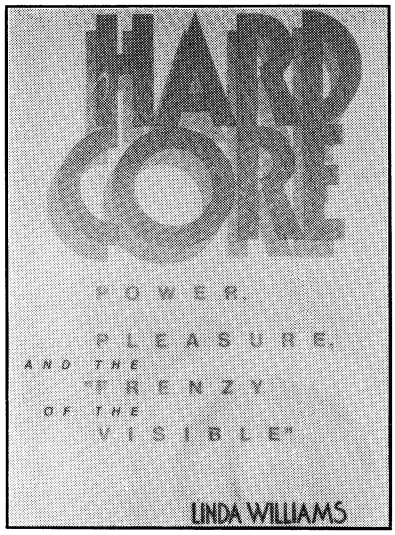

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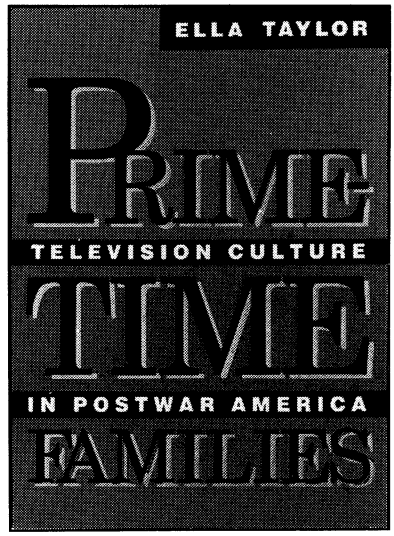

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Brian Henderson

The Civil War: "Did

The Civil War (1990), a series of films made by Ken Burns and a large number of collaborators, was seen by more viewers than any other program in the history of the Public Broadcasting System. Thirty-nine million Americans watched the 11-hour series on five consecutive nights in September 1990. Since that time the series has been rebroadcast in its entirety on a weekly basis and an additional rebroadcast has been scheduled for spring 1991; an album of the music used in the series has been released; a book based on the series has been published; and, since January 1991, all nine of the series' episodes have been available for purchase or rent on the home video market. Critically, *The Civil War* has been widely hailed as the television event of the year. Indeed, it has probably been more ardently and universally praised than anything in the history of public television. (*Roots*, one recalls with some difficulty, was produced for and shown on network television.)

The PBS program guide observes, accurately as far as it goes: "The series uses archival photographs, period paintings, footage of battle sites, interviews with historians and a chorus of voices reading from diaries, letters, speeches and newspapers of the era." To this list should be added music, sound effects (battle cries, firearm sounds, wind and rain sounds), and graphics (maps, battle diagrams, episode and section titles, etc.).

These constituent elements of *The Civil War* are of considerable interest in themselves. But what is truly extraordinary, in my view, are the ways in which these elements are interwoven in the text of the series as a whole. A preliminary survey of that text is attempted in what follows. Begun here, although not completed, is an argument that *The Civil War* constitutes a new kind of textuality, involving new kinds of arrangements, or dispositions, of sounds and images. Understanding the textual

it not seem real?"

operation of *The Civil War* in this sense is not a necessary preliminary to other studies—the film's rewriting of popular memory, its "ideological project," etc.—but it may contribute to such studies.

Fundamental to the complex textuality of *The Civil War* are the ways in which its photographs, voices, music, and sound effects interact with its three levels of organization. These comprise: (1) 11 episodes, titled by year and by verbal designation, more or less metaphoric; (2) section headings within each episode, variable in number and in manner of reference to the subject of the episode; and (3) an overall division, cutting across the other two levels, between chronicle (Gettysburg: The First Day; Gettysburg: The Second Day; Gettysburg: The Third Day) and topics not dependent on chronological placement: the role of women in the war; food and drink in the war; the firearms used in the war; etc. On a qualitative basis, somewhat nebulously perhaps, one might also identify a number of "set-pieces," in which images and sounds are more closely related than in the vast bulk of the series, and in which an aesthetic ambition is more than usually discernible. The set-pieces come most often at the end of an episode and are rarely more than a few minutes in duration; they include the reading of the letter of Sullivan Ballou (in Episode One), the death of Stonewall Jackson (Four), and the reading of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (Five).

The overall episode break-down is as follows:

Episode One:	1861—The Cause	(99 min.)
Episode Two:	1862—A Very Bloody Affair	(69 min.)
Episode Three:	1862—Forever Free	(76 min.)
Episode Four:	1863—Simply Murder	(62 min.)
Episode Five:	1863—The Universe of Battle	(95 min.)
Episode Six:	1864—Valley of the Shadow of Death	(70 min.)
Episode Seven:	1864—Most Hallowed Ground	(72 min.)
Episode Eight:	1865—War is All Hell	(69 min.)
Episode Nine:	1865—The Better Angels of Our Nature	(68 min.)

The section-headings of the nine episodes are as follows:

1861—The Cause
All Night Forever
Are We Free?
A House Divided
The Meteor
Gun Men
Manassas
A Thousand Mile Front
Honorable Manhood

1862—A Very Bloody Affair
Politics
Ironclads
Lincolnites
The Peninsula
Our Boy
Shiloh
The Arts of Death
Republics
On to Richmond

1862—Forever Free
Stonewall
The Beast
The Seven Days
kiss Daniel for me
Saving the Union
Antietam
The Higher Object

1863—Simply Murder
Northern Lights
Oh! Be Joyful
The Kingdom of Jones
Under the Shade of the Trees
A Dust Covered Man

1863—The Universe of Battle
Gettysburg: The 1st Day
Gettysburg: The 2nd Day
Gettysburg: The 3rd Day
She Ranks Me
Vicksburg
Bottom Rail on Top
The River of Death
A New Birth of Freedom

1864—Valley of the Shadow of Death
Grant
Lee
In the Wilderness
Move by the Left Flank
Now, Fix Me
The Remedy

1864—Most Hallowed Ground
a warm place in the field
Nathan Bedford Forrest
Summer, 1864
Spies
The Crater
Headquarters, U.S.A.
The Promised Land
The Age of Shoddy
Can these be men?
The People's Resolution
Most Hallowed Ground

1865—War is All Hell
Sherman's March
The Breath of Emancipation
December 25, 1864
Died of a Theory
I Want to See Richmond
Appomattox

1865—The Better Angels of Our Nature
Assassination
Useless, Useless
The Picklocks of Biographers
Was it Not Real?

The photographs used in the series—16,000 of them were filmed—are perhaps what most astonished and bewitched most viewers. For that reason, and to displace the tyranny of the visual, I will begin with the series' voices. To displace in turn the logocentric privileging of speech, or at least to postpone it for a brief time, I will begin with a few words about *The Civil War*'s music.

With one or two exceptions, all the series' music comes from the Civil War period. This is not surprising; nineteenth-century romantic composers made the use of folk songs and other native materials obligatory in celebrating a nation or region—their own or a patron's. The classical Hollywood composers, many of them displaced Europeans, used this approach as a matter of course, and used it also as a shortcut to finish the vast amount of

work they were asked to do. Even a modernist like Virgil Thompson orchestrated cowboy songs and regional songs—with wit, dissonance, and trenchant commentary—in his scores for *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937), both by Pare Lorentz. *The Civil War* made the decision *not* to orchestrate, but to use its Civil War songs individually, and separately, as artifacts. The series went much further than this, however, by avoiding the traditional arrangements of the songs it uses, and with them any attempt to reproduce what people of the Civil War era actually heard. It subjects the songs instead to its own severe, evocative stylization, involving, first of all, an instrumental minimalism. Thus the "Battle Cry of Freedom," heard again and again throughout the series, is played on a solo piano by Jacqueline Schwab. So are "Flag of Columbia," "All Quiet on the Potomac," and one of two versions of "Marching Through Georgia"—the other version is played by two fiddles, a guitar, and a banjo. "Lorena" is played by two fiddles and a guitar. "Shenandoah" is played by a cello and a piano. "Dixie" is played by Bobbie Horton on solo guitar, and so on. Resorting neither to orchestration nor traditional settings, the series' approach to its Civil War songs is to turn them into chamber music.

We do not know what 16,000 Civil War photographs are supposed to look like on film; we do not know what voices reading Civil War texts should sound like; we do not know indeed what an 11-hour reconstruction or evocation of the Civil War is supposed to look and sound like. But we do have some idea what the most familiar Civil War songs are supposed to sound like. The series' music tells us that the series as a whole is a chamber work for solo voices and instruments. The longest, most expensive, most elaborately researched work in the history of American public television, which concerns some of the most large-scale, epic events in American history, itself severely avoids both epic and largeness of scale.

A second point about the music, distinct from but related to the first, is that many, if not most of the songs, including those mentioned, are played in a sad, contemplative, funereal, and/or dirge-like way. Sometimes this is topical—an upbeat "Marching Through Georgia" is played when the Northern perspective of Sherman's March is presented, the solo piano version, called a "lament" in the sound-track recording credits, when the Southern perspective is explored. There is a brass-band version of "Dixie" in the South's glory days and both solo guitar and solo piano dirges later when the Confederacy is falling apart. Many other songs, such as "Battle Cry of Freedom," have no upbeat versions—Schwab's sad, hesitant, ruminative version is the farthest thing from either a battle cry or a rally 'round the flag. Here too the music sets the tone for the series as a whole. Many of the voices, certainly the countless photographs of the dead, the dying, the maimed and the buried, and the series as a whole have a chastened, quietly grieving quality. Reviewing the series for *The Nation*, Robert Cole asks, "Is melancholy the only emotion the producers could associate with this revolution?" It is a good question and the answer seems to be, in the terms posed, yes. Emotionally speaking, melancholy may well be the most important product of the series. Of course this has to do with the wholesale slaughter that we see and hear about throughout the series, but it has also to do with what historian Barbara J. Fields calls in several places the "higher purpose"—the liberation of the slaves—which she says emerged after the war had begun as its chief goal. But Fields, in one of the last commentaries in the series, asks who in fact won the war—since many basic rights of citizenship were systematically denied blacks for a hundred years after it.

The songs of the series are rarely played whole, but almost always fragmented into phrases and sections. These fragments—sometimes the same fragment, sometimes different ones—are then recycled through the series as a whole. Many of them recur dozens of times, creating an effect of evocative repetition that is a major feature of the series' textuality. Such fragmentation is also necessary for interweaving the music closely with other elements of the text. Sometimes a musical phrase accompanies a speech of no more than a few sentences; other musical passages bridge several photos and/or a shift from one topic to another in the narration. It is not surprising that Ken Burns lists himself as one of the series' two musical directors—he helped choose the musical selections and also worked with the musicians to achieve the tonal and mood variations he wanted for different passages in the text.

The music is so carefully integrated into the text that one might disagree with this or that selection as one would disagree with an argument. Passages

from "Lorena," an 1857 song of romantic loss and remembrance popular with troops on both sides, are played frequently in the series. (This is the song that Max Steiner uses for the opening scene of *The Searchers*, masterfully adapting it to the rhythm of Ethan's slow approach on horseback.) It seems to me inappropriate that the series plays "Lorena" when it discusses the hard-working women of the war, nurses and others, who faced horror, and sometimes danger, on a daily basis. But "Lorena" is also played in the wake of Lincoln's assassination, brilliantly suggesting that, reviled on many sides while alive, Lincoln became a lost romantic object in death.

An exception to the series' practice of fragmenting its songs is "Ashokan Farewell," a 1984 composition by Jay Ungar that sounds more like a Civil War song than many of the genuine article. (It is performed by three fiddles, including Ungar's, and two guitars.) This piece, which is played more often than any other in the series except, possibly, "The Battle Cry of Freedom," appears most often at the beginnings and ends of episodes. Because of its crucial placements, and because it is usually played whole, "Ashokan Farewell" has come to seem, more than any other, the musical emblem of *The Civil War*. It is the series' chief lament-anthem of farewell in a number of senses—which will have to be explored elsewhere.

Like many of its musical arrangements, *The Civil War*'s voices are all solos. They may be subdivided into an overall narrational voice (David McCullough), representing no particular person, and a number of voices representing individual persons. The latter includes well-known historical figures as well as unknown or little-known people who kept diaries or wrote letters that the series draws on. The historical figures, and the people—unseen—who read them, are as follows:

Abraham Lincoln	Sam Waterston
Ulysses S. Grant	Jason Robards
Frederick Douglass	Morgan Freeman
Joshua L. Chamberlain	Paul Roebling
Walt Whitman	Garrison Keillor
Robert E. Lee	George Black
William T. Sherman	Arthur Miller
Jefferson Davis	Horton Foote
Horace Greeley	Philip Bosco
George McClellan	Terry Courier
Stonewall Jackson	Jody Powell
Benjamin F. Butler	Studs Terkel

The most important lesser-known figures are:

Mary Chestnut	Julie Harris
Pvt. Elisha Hunt Rhodes	Chris Murney
Pvt. Sam Watkins	Charley McDowell
George Templeton Strong	George Plimpton

The four lesser-known voices, all diarists, fall—rather too neatly perhaps—into a North/South, high-born/low-born schema. On the high end, George Templeton Strong was a wealthy, conservative lawyer and civic leader in New York City; Mary Chestnut had access to the highest levels of the Confederacy—her husband, a former senator from South Carolina, was a member of the Davis cabinet. On the low end, Elisha Hunt Rhodes was a private in the 2nd Rhode Island Volunteers and Sam Watkins was a private in Company H of the 1st Tennessee. Some background of the well-known figures is provided when they first appear, in the nature of facts, especially about their early lives, that viewers might not know. The four diarists, whom only specialists will know, are very pointedly introduced—as individuals and as diarists—in the series' first episode. Their writings are returned to again and again throughout the series.

In *The Civil War*, it is worth noting, the historical figures, great and small, and the voices that speak their words become virtually indistinguishable. This puts pressure on the speakers in the series, both the actors—Harris, Waterston, Robards, Freeman, Bosco—and the non-actors—Miller, Foote, Powell, McDowell. (Terkel, Keillor, and Plimpton are non-actors but celebrities—their performing voices are well known to us.) "The act of love is a confession," said Camus. "Selfishness screams aloud, vanity shows off, or else true generosity reveals itself." Where Camus writes of self-revelation, we would write of presentation of self or role-playing. Even in these terms, one is tempted to say, the act of love is nothing compared to the naked human voice held up to the grave issues of the Civil War. *The Civil War*'s speakers achieve, almost uniformly, a restrained, often melancholy tonality that meshes remarkably with the other elements of the text. (A partial exception may be Garrison Keillor, who, reading Whitman and others, seems to try too hard to be expressive.)

Frederick Douglass and Lincoln were orators but the readings of Freeman and Waterston assiduously avoid the orational, or any public style; each seems to speak, quietly, to a friend, or to himself.

Morgan Freeman holds back from "acting" Frederick Douglass; he uses the remarkable instrument of his voice—low, grave, thrilling—as simply as possible. This allows Douglass's words to reach the viewer with maximum clarity and emotional power. In an 1863 speech, Douglass urged black people to "fly to arms" and to smite to death "the power that would bury the Government and your liberty in the same hopeless grave"; he concludes, "This is your golden opportunity." The temptation for an actor to wrap his voice around the last phrase is powerful, but Freeman resists it. He speaks it as flatly and tonelessly as his musical voice permits and instead of an actor we are aware of hundreds of years of oppression that can be overthrown in a moment. (Freeman's melancholy sound suggests, beyond Douglass's words, the oppression and suffering that were not ended in that moment.) Waterston continually displaces us as a speaker for Lincoln—this is not the voice we expect. But we pay closer attention to Lincoln's words as a result; and Waterston's reading of the Gettysburg address cuts against decades of tradition: not *of* the people, *by* the people, *for* the people but "government of the *people*, by the *people*, for the *people*, shall not perish from the earth." Even at the end of the series we may not accept Waterston's voice as Lincoln's, but there will be no going back to the intonements of Raymond Massey either.

The amateurs were perhaps more typecast for voice than the professionals—not what a figure sounded like but how he or she "should" sound. We see pictures of Jefferson Davis and hear Horton Foote's voice and are convinced without thinking about it that this is how Davis should sound. After the Battle of Bull Run, called Manassas in the South, we hear a number of Northern voices describing and bemoaning the rout and its implications. There is then a switch to a jubilant Davis, "My fellow citizens, your little Army, derided for its want of arms, derided for its lack of all the essential material of war, has met the grand army of the enemy, routed it at every point . . . " The jaunty music of "Bonnie Blue Flag" accompanies the speech, but there is music in Foote's voice also. There is no ordinary music in Arthur Miller's Sherman, and should not be. Miller's gravelly voice, cutting through the nonsense to the blunt, disturbing truth of a subject puts Sherman—our idea of him—before us. George Black is soft-voiced and recessive as Robert E. Lee; a voice that seems to convey sentiment openly but to hide the person beneath. The undefeated South seems to rasp in Jody Powell's reading of Stonewall Jackson and a number of other Southerners.

Important aspects of *The Civil War* have to do with the overall narrator and with interactions between the overall narrator and the other voices of the text. The overall narrator is unidentified in the series whereas each of the other voices is identified not only initially but also, with rare exceptions, at the end of every speech. Thus virtually every speech except the overall narrator's is vocally signed—"Mary Chestnut," "Frederick Douglass," "Abraham Lincoln," etc. All of the voices of the series except that of the overall narrator say what the signers said or wrote—the series merely quotes them. The words of the overall narrator, on the other hand, are not quoted; they are written by the film-makers to be spoken by the narrator. The narrator is by no means a spokesman for the film-makers or their views, however—his is as much a voice located in the text as the various levels of voice and narration that critics of the fiction have proposed. The figure of the overall narrator is constructed, and one of the guidelines for constructing it was suggested by Ken Burns in a filmed interview.

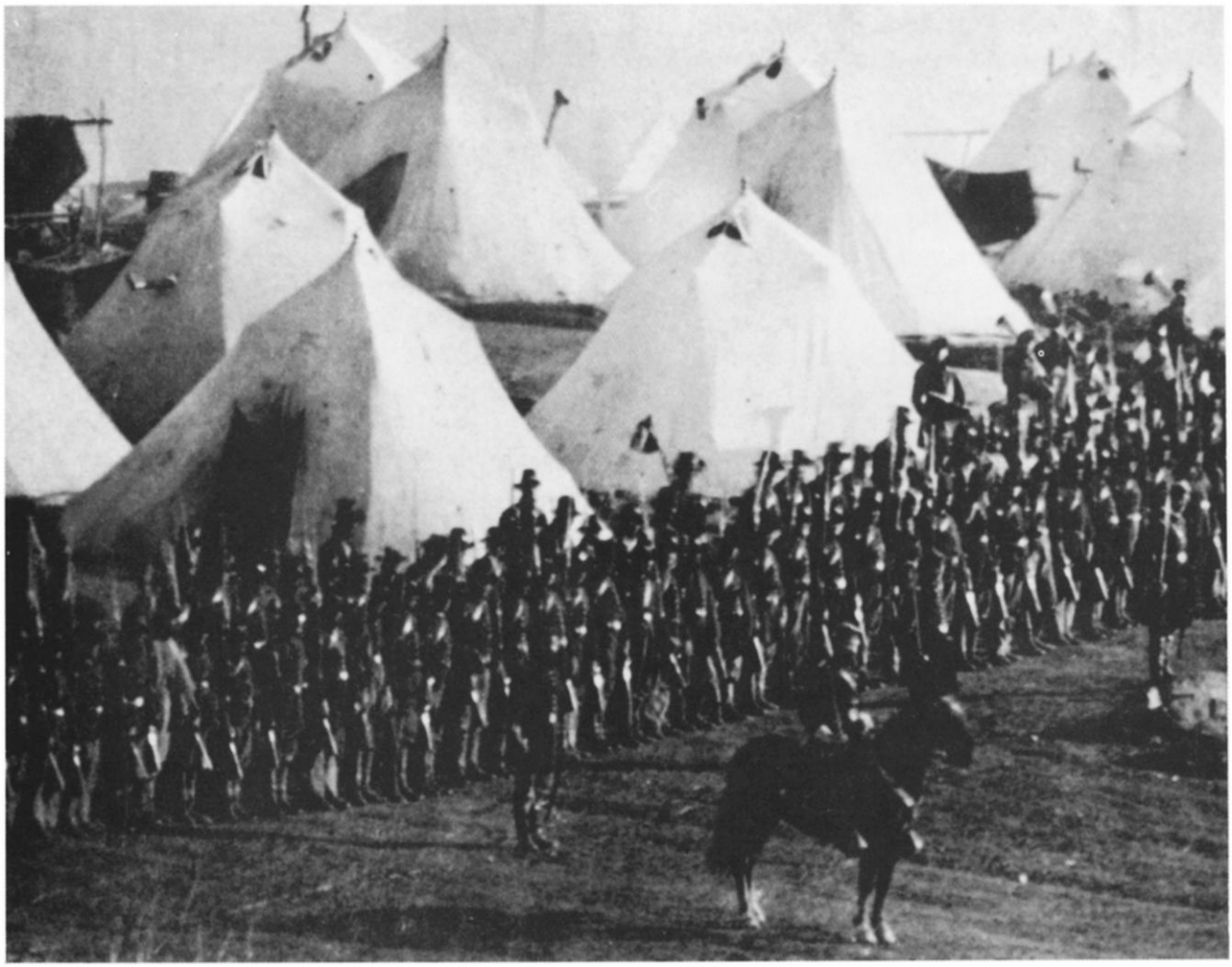
> So many people start a documentary film with the idea that they know the answer, that the documentary is merely a means of expression.

> For us it is a process of discovery; we don't know what it's going to be about. We are as curious, we hope, as the viewer is about what happened and use the process of making a documentary film as an exploration.

A finished text cannot itself embody the discovery or exploration process involved in its making; it can only represent it. Such representation can be a very effective rhetorical strategy, however, as *The Civil War* shows. It is crucial to such a strategy that the overall narrator not speak retrospectively. He cannot speak from the standpoint of the end of the war, that is, with full knowledge of what is to transpire. He sometimes anticipates a later event, or hints at it, but this most often occurs in the preview-like passages that begin many of the episodes—Episode Five, for example:

> Now, to draw federal troops away from Vicksburg, Lee led his army onto Northern soil again, looking for the right moment to attack. When it came, on the morning of July 1st, 1863, it would be in the most ordinary of places. For three days, 150,000 men would make war on the gentle farmland of southern Pennsylvania. When the third day was over, it would prove to have been the most crucial day of the entire war.

The narration, mainly by Geoffrey C. Ward, is not written omnisciently and retrospectively, but certain speakers might have made it sound that way —Gregory Peck or James Earl Jones, for instance. McCullough's voice, neither ringing nor booming, sounds unrhetorical; it is a pragmatic-sounding voice, brightly interested in each of the carloads of facts, names, ironies, and events it speaks, giving each its due, its proper intonation and emphasis, but never becoming moved or fascinated, always, after nicely judged pauses, moving along. His voice



also has another quality essential to an 11-hour series—it wears well; it seems able to go anywhere, to treat any subject, person, or emotion, and never tire us or strike a false note.

There is a division of function between the overall narrator and the other voices of the text, but it is not a hard and fast one. The signed voices speak out of their own experience, even when they are philosophizing or fantasizing. At the same time, the overall narrator speaks of strategic and statistical matters that the participants could not know; like the signed voices and the historians, however, he sometimes tells anecdotes and sometimes makes interpretations. The overall narrator's voice, unimposing in itself, never overwhelms the other voices and never intrudes upon or competes with the interviews with historians that are spread throughout the text. A rare, perhaps unique exception occurs in Episode Eight. Miller as Sherman has just spoken the second of two Sherman quotes in close succession, whereupon the narrator begins his next passage with yet another Sherman quote. Sherman said so many pungent things about the war that everyone gets into the act.

A more typical instance of interaction between the overall narrator and the other voices of the text occurs during the Battle of Bull Run/Manassas. The presentation of the battle alternates between the narrator's description of battle movements, North and South, and the testimony of a number of witnesses and other commentators on the event and its aftermath, including a number of English and French observers. The nonretrospective narration reinforces, and is reinforced by, the standpoint of the contemporary witnesses, who did not know what was going to happen. North and South both believed the war would be short-lived, indeed that the first large battle would be decisive. Rather than state this fact through the overall narrator, the series builds up a sense of it through a very large number of voices, quite differently positioned, each stating its viewpoint. Thus the results of the battle, when they come, have some of the shock to viewers that they had to the disillusioned witnesses—pictures of amputations, including a pile of severed limbs; Union troops running, walking, dragging all night long until they saw the spires of Washington, DC. The narrator's overall description of the battle, never anticipating or prejudging what will happen next, provides context for the witnesses' testimonies without undermining them.

Ulysses S. Grant

The visual material of the series may be divided into the photographic, the filmic, and the graphic—the film's episode and section titles, its credits, etc. The photographic material consists of 16,000 photographs, paintings, lithographs, broadsides, and newspapers of the Civil War period. The filmic materials consist of present-day footage of battle sites of the Civil War, synch-sound discussions by present-day historians, and archival footage, some of it silent, some with original voice-over, of several reunions of Civil War veterans.

Civil War-era photographs make up the vast bulk of the series; at least they seem to do so—they are what viewers remember and critics most prize. The gathering and selection of these photos, enough to fill out much of the series' 11 hours, was a prodigious feat of research. The film-makers visited more

than 80 museums and libraries, including not only well-known ones, but state and regional archives and historical societies as well. The film-makers include works by celebrated photographers—the Matthew Brady studio, Alexander Gardner, and Timothy O'Sullivan, for example; but they draw much more extensively upon anonymous newspaper photographers, portrait and souvenir photos (many sold to soldiers by photographers in camp and on campaign), the records of regiments and other combat units, family albums, and chillingly medical photographs of the wounded, maimed, starved, and dead.

Seeing the assembled Civil War photos in the series, however, is a very far thing from seeing them in an archive or a book of photographs. The photographic images of the series are time-bound, which means that the time of the viewer's perception of each, and the arrangement of successive images in time, is indeed bound, not free. There is also, of course, the work of the camera, which sometimes begins with the whole of a photograph then moves in—by either a cut or a camera movement—to a detail or series of details. Sometimes the camera starts with a detail and moves out gradually to encompass either the whole photograph or a larger section of it. Sometimes a photograph is returned to later in the series, either for the same view and/or for different ones, creating a sense that the text is not through with the photo, that it has to come back to explore it further, in some cases again and again, as though seeking its elusive meaning.

One of these photos is reproduced in the series book, which describes it as showing an "airy ward in the Armory Square Hospital [in Washington, DC] (that) appears to be decorated either for the Fourth of July or perhaps for the end of the war." The series' text seems as fascinated with this photograph as Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* is with its photos. Perhaps it is the very deep space of the photo, whose centrally located vanishing point is interrupted by a young man with an amputated leg sitting in a wheel chair with his head tilted back and his eyes on the camera; perhaps it is the festive flags hanging high up on rafters in the foreground, contrasting with the sad scene of convalescents, some of them amputees, beneath; or perhaps it is the sort of half-banner with stars, apparently hanging from a rafter deeper in space than the flags, but impossible to read, either because it is semi-transparent and partially reveals deeper space behind it or because it is itself stamped with a trompe l'oeil design, or both.

The viewer's perception of the series' photographs is conditioned, in addition to the factors discussed above, by the various linguistic components and levels of the text. But this conditioning is by no means reducible to Roland Barthes's notion of *anchrage*, the idea that photographs almost always appear with linguistic messages that tell us how to read them, limiting the virtually unlimited number of interpretations that a photograph itself might sustain. *The Civil War* limits the readable potential of the photos it displays, if only by cutting down the time of reading and, sometimes, by offering only a detail of the photo for viewing; but it makes little if any use of linguistic *anchrage*, opting instead for a non-*anchrage* or even, since it seems to be a methodological principle, anti-*anchrage*.

Never does the overall narrator or anyone else in the series address us about the photos shown: to tell us how to look at them, to take particular note of one rather than another, or to notice some aspect or detail of any one of them. Rarely does a speaker even refer to a photo; only twice, that I can recall, in 11 hours. At the beginning of Episode Five, we see a photograph of three Confederate soldiers captured at Gettysburg and hear historian Shelby Foote tell us that he is very fond of the photo and why he is; at the end of the same episode, the overall narrator explains, as we look at it, that the only photo of Lincoln at Gettysburg shows him sitting down after his speech—expecting a longer address, the photographer took his time focussing. If the voices of the text do not, with two exceptions, refer to the photos, neither do the photos illustrate specific points of narration. The two unravel independently, linked only very generally by a common topic. A category of partial exception seems necessary when a photo of a particular historical figure accompanies a commentary about him. The same few photos of Grant and Sherman, among others, tend to be used again and again throughout the series, and coincide with a wide variety of narrational situations and contexts. Indeed, their very frequency and multi-function make such photos a general, not specific, support for any particular piece of narration. The matter is different, however, when the camera moves slowly

into a detail of the subject's face, or even of his eyes, while the narration probes his character. There the photo, pinned like a butterfly by the camera, is impressed into the narration's specific service, if only for a moment.

The kind of text that results from this anti-*anchrage* policy is strange and extraordinarily interesting. Generalization takes us only so far, however —*The Civil War* is enormously varied and the relations of photos and voices vary accordingly. I will look closely at the final section of Episode One, "Honorable Manhood," which presents a reading of Sullivan Ballou's letter to his wife. One of the best-known passages in the series, it is reproduced in toto in a filmed interview with Ken Burns and is included in audio form on the sound-track recording; also, some photos from the passage and the text of the letter are reproduced in the series book. The placement of the section, outside Episode One's chronology, sets it off significantly from the rest of the episode, and in some respects from the rest of the series as a whole. The preceding section, "A Thousand Mile Front" took up the series' chronicle from the Battle of Bull Run in July 1861 to the appointment of General McClellan as commander of the Union army five days later to his training of the army in August and September 1861. Then McClellan formulated a grand Union strategy with offensives on Richmond in the east, into Tennessee in the center, and along the Mississippi in the west; but for the balance of 1861 he did nothing. The episode concludes with a remark by George Templeton Strong on December 31st, in which he looks forward to an 1862 no better than the year just ending. This should end an episode called "1861" but it doesn't; another heading appears on the screen—"Honorable Manhood"—which concerns a letter written July 14, 1861.

A very close reading of "Honorable Manhood," which lasts 3 1/2 minutes, would take many pages. A shot of a Union camp begins the episode—rows of white tents with officers and men in formation in front of them; on the sound track we hear the sounds of drill—a distanced-sounding

"column left," etc. At the same time the narrator tells us that a week before the Battle of Bull Run, Sullivan Ballou, a major in the 2nd Rhode Island Volunteers, wrote home to his wife in Smithfield. We continue to hear drill sounds over the beginning of the letter, even after the shot changes to the photo of what seems to be an officer's quarters inside a white tent—through which outside sounds could no doubt be heard. While we continue to hear Ballou's letter, the camera moves slowly around the photo of the room, coming to rest first on a white hammock chair, then on the crude table next to it, then on an unlit candle placed on the table. The camera seems to be trying to imagine the physical circumstances under which the letter was written. At some point in the camera's movement the drill sounds recede and we hear the start of "Akoshan Farewell," which is played without interruption until its conclusion. The camera focuses on a strange reproduction of a painting, or photo, pinned on the wall of the room, perhaps of an orator giving an impassioned speech.

As Ballou begins to talk about his love for his wife, we see a formal photo of a handsome man and his wife looking into the camera—is this Sullivan and Sarah Ballou? The photo is followed, however, by photos of four Civil War-era couples, two of them beginning with a shot of hands touching tenderly and moving up and back to the photo as a whole. When Ballou speaks of his regretting not living and loving more and not seeing their two sons grow up to honorable manhood, we see a photo of a couple and two boys. Is this Ballou and his family? It seems not likely since the man has a corporal's stripes on his arm and Ballou was a major even before the war's first big battle. As Ballou speaks of the dead coming back to earth, we see several film shots in color of a battle field at dawn or twilight, with a single cannon in silhouette on the horizon—perhaps the very battlefield he died on. When Ballou writes that he will be there when the soft breeze fans his wife's cheek, we see a closer shot of the cannon with the grass beneath it blowing in the breeze and a chain loop from the cannon hanging prominently in the foreground. Ballou had spoken earlier of his being bound to his wife "with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence can break" but also of his love of country coming over him like a strong wind that "bears me irresistibly with all these chains to the battle field." Does

the shot suggest that the chains prevailed over the cables?

As the letter concludes, the images again show a tent interior, this time a different one, and come back finally to a different photo of the tents and drill formations seen at the beginning of the section. The narrator informs us, just as the music ends, that Ballou was killed a week later at the first battle of Bull Run.

The photos of the Union camp that begin and end the "Honorable Manhood" section actually show the 5th Vermont at Camp Griffin, Virginia, not the 2nd Rhode Island Volunteers, Ballou's unit, which was camped at Washington, DC. We know this because a two-page reproduction of the 5th Vermont photo appears on the title pages of the series book —the left half of the photo is the first photo of the "Honorable Manhood" series; the right side is its last.

It seems likely that not one of the photographs in the passage has anything literally to do with Sullivan Ballou. The film-makers used the photographs they had not for a referential function but to build a metaphoric series suggested by Ballou's letter and what they imagined to be its likely circumstances of composition. (The shots of the cou-

ples are a metaphoric series within a series.) They also perused adjacent details within several of the photographs with the camera—a metonymic series (within a metaphoric whole), used not for realism but to imagine the composition of Ballou's writing in a different way. Some will say the film-makers did what they did because, lacking photos of Ballou and other subjects, they had no choice. In fact, there *is* a photo of Ballou's unit, the 2nd Rhode Island Infantry, shown drilling in the summer of 1861 in a camp near Washington, DC—it is reproduced in the front endpapers of the series book. But it is a far less evocative photo that the ones used, and it has no tents behind the troops for (imagined) metonymic displacement from exterior to interior. (The sounds effects of drill, metonymic to both spaces, provide another bridge between them.)

What the film-makers did in the Sullivan Ballou section is far more interesting than an assembly of Ballou photos would have been—far more interesting, far more innovative, far more "creative" by any standard. And what the film-makers did in this section they also did—to borrow the narration's words for the war's farflung theater of operations—at 10,000 other places in the text. Each of these sites is different and each poses a distinct challenge for the analyst.

Ken Burns addressed some of the issues discussed above in a filmed interview about the making of the series. "*The Civil War* was a logistical nightmare," he says

> to keep all of the film footage, and all the first-person quotes, and all the music, the sound effects, and the writing all straight. We really wanted with the writing and the shooting to not worry about whether there were images to fit the particular writing or whether there was writing to fit the images. We would go off and film what we wanted to film, go off and write about what we wanted to write and not worry about that. Later on that made editing incredibly difficult. But we were able really to explore the war . . . So the writing is independent, the shooting is independent, all of the stuff is. And then when we get into editing and begin a really long difficult process of horsetrading between these two sides, seemingly disparate sides, to make it all work out to tell our story, our his-tory, to our best ability.

Burns reveals perhaps more than he realized when he speaks of independent writing and independent shooting, followed by "a really long difficult process of horsetrading between the two sides." "The two sides": that is, narration and photographs, words and pictures, are themselves engaged in a kind of civil war. That war, like the Civil War, took place not globally, one supposes, but in 10,000 places. The metaphor of horsetrading for working out an accommodation between narration and photographs—"to make it all work out, to tell our story, our his-tory"—is interesting also. The word probably refers to highminded debates among colleagues all seeking the best series: what to include, what to exclude, how best to match these photos and these narrations. But horsetrading in American terminology and legend is also par excellence a situation of dishonesty, of fudging, of making appearance pass as reality, of discounts and short shrifts, of fooling the eye and therefore the mind, of making the viewer buy what he thinks he sees, but does not. In works such as Faulkner's "Spotted Horses" (in *The Hamlet* [1940]), John Ford's *Wagonmaster* (1950), and many others,

there is also a specific discrepancy between what one sees—wild or painted or broken-down horses—and what one hears—the lies, the explanations, the glossings over of a persuasive seller. The listener, who always swallows the deal, does not discover the truth until after the fact, when it's too late; he is always complicit in the swindle, however; he has seen what he wanted to see.

The Civil War's makers seem untroubled by the horsetrading between sounds and images that went on in its making—and they should be. It is the text itself that points to the matter in a number of ways and places, bearing traces of its making but perhaps doing more than that. No pointing is more notable than the last passage spoken in the entire series, particularly its last two sentences, which may be read as applying to the series itself, as well as the matter at hand. Over photos of the 50th Anniversary Reunion at Gettysburg, we hear the voice of Shelby Foote:

> In time even death itself might be abolished. Sgt. Barry Benson, a South Carolina veteran . . . of the war from before Fort Sumter to Appomattox saw it so when he got around to composing the reminiscences he hoped "would go down among my descendants for a long time." Reliving the war in words he began to wish he could relive it in fact; and he came to believe that he and his fellow soldiers, gray and blue, might one day be able to do just that, if not here on earth then afterwards in Valhalla. "Who knows," he asked, as his narrative drew toward its close, "but it may be given us after this life to meet again in the old quarters, to play chess and draughts and get up soon to answer the morning roll call, to fall in at the tap of a drum to drill and dress parade, and again to hastily don our war gear while the monotonous patter of a long roll summons to battle. Who knows but again the old flags, ragged and torn, snapping in the wind, may face each other in a flutter of pursuing and pursued, while the cries of victory fill a summer day. And after the battle then the slain and wounded will arise and all will be together under the two flags, all sound and well, and there will be talking and laughter and cheers. And all will say, 'Did it not seem real? Was it not as in the old days?' "

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Albert Johnson

Moods Indigo: A Long View

Part 2

Like *The Color Purple* (the film with which Part I of this article concluded), another black novel-into-film that failed to live up to expectations was *Native Son* (1986) directed by a white director, Joel Freedman, though scripted by a black scenarist, Richard Wesley. An earlier effort to film this novel took place in Argentina, with author Richard Wright in the major role, and directed by the Frenchman, Pierre Chenal. Oddly enough, the curious earlier version is more compelling than the remake, even though neither version captures the tragic power of the novel. Censorship restrictions hampered the former, and lack of imagination destroyed the latter. The challenge of *Native Son* lies in finding the perfect image of its beleaguered and ignorant hero, Bigger Thomas, a nineteen-year-old ghetto black in Chicago of the late 1930s. The insight and sympathy of an American DeSica was necessary, with a strong neorealistic approach to the milieu of the Depression. The young actor chosen for the part, Victor Love, could not erase intelligence from his eyes, and his acting technique obliterated any conviction that Bigger Thomas's responses to society and his fumbling crime were based upon ignorance and brute responses to life. Instead of tragedy, one finds only horror, and the sociopolitical undercurrents of the novel, with Bigger as a symbol of the oppressed black man seen through Communist eyes, are blunted or ignored. One remembers only the crime itself, the incineration of a young woman's body in a furnace, with all of its gruesomeness on screen. The supporting performances were more compelling than that of the doomed protagonist, but even these were not given any dimension either in terms of economic and social chaos. The subplot regarding Bigger and his girlfriend is betrayed, too, because he does not murder her as he does in the novel, thus eliminating a critical change in character for the youthful criminal, a very Dostoyevskyan attribute of Richard Wright's philosophy. It is as if Bill Sikes decided not to kill Nancy in *Oliver Twist* because of a crisis of conscience. One has read of producer interference and last minute re-editing of *Native Son*, which only adds to a feeling of regretable failure regarding the film. Once more, one can only speculate upon the results of this production if a black director had been its controlling creative force. Once more it appears that the studios cannot cope with black Americans except as characters in comedies and police dramas.

The most publicized new black film-maker is Spike Lee. Although he had made an earlier film, an unpretentious short called *Joe's Bed-Stuy: We Cut Heads* (1984) about drug dealers in a Brooklyn barbershop (a disjointed, odd work), it was the presentation of *She's Gotta Have It* at the Cannes film festival in 1986 that caused excitement. The timing was perfect. Here was a film about blacks that possessed just the correct mixture of urban satire and social comment to attract attention, plus it had a distinctively comic tone. It was a film that offended no one, and to everyone's surprise, Spike Lee's performance in the film revealed an original comic talent, vivid and delightful. A great deal of attention was given to the film's low budget ($170,000) and *She's Gotta Have It* has received acclaim and box-office success everywhere. The free-spirited heroine, Nola Darling (Tracy Camila Johns) has accepted having three lovers as a casual (and necessary) arrangement. Despite the long tradition of Hollywood's black women as sex-symbols, Nola's sexuality seems wholesome, honest, and uncalculating. Lee has his characters speak to the audience as fellow conspirators. No one is shocked by the nudity and sexual romping about in Nola's candlelit studio. Only occasionally does one feel tension in audiences: when one of Nola's women friends expresses lesbian attraction to her, and when Jamie, Nola's most reserved boyfriend, suddenly assaults her in a moment of self-righteous anger. It is, perhaps, the latter sequence that throws

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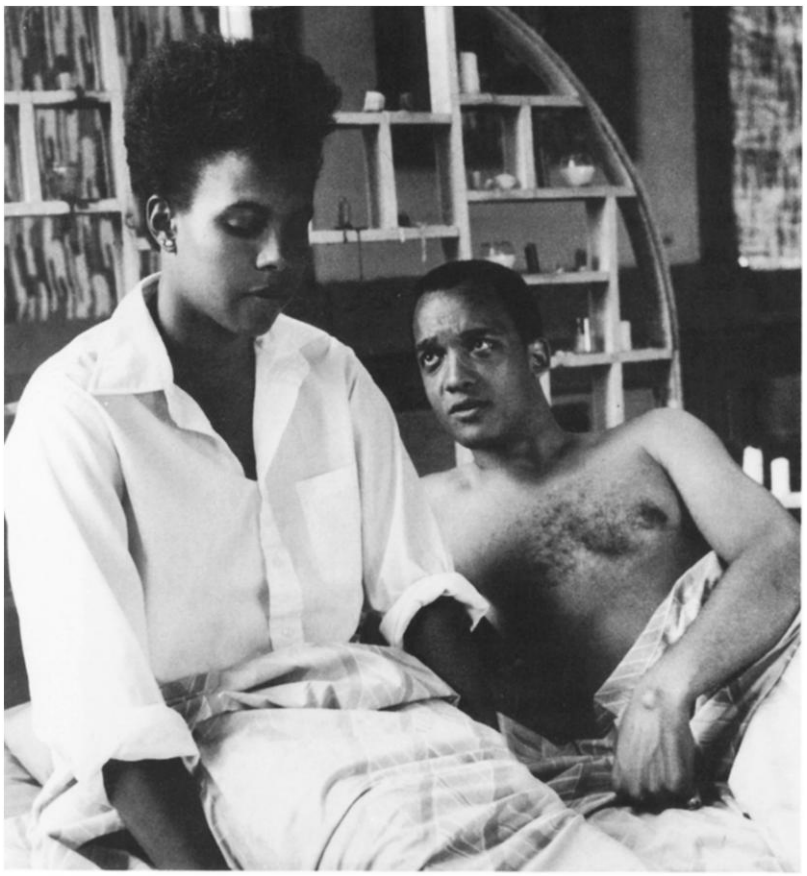


Tracy Camila Johns and Redmond Hicks

She's Gotta Have It off-balance, giving the film a bitter, discordant note. Can even a black director tolerate a self-reliant, dominant black woman Nola without somehow subjecting her to humiliation? Nola's character overall and her final decision to abandon her three suitors and revise her philosophy about herself and her lifestyle are made believable by the personality and image of Tracy Camila Johns. The fresh-faced reality of the actress presents a new image of the black American woman of the 1980s: attractive, intelligently articulate, and very down-to-earth about her sexuality. One hesitates to use the term promiscuous while observing the film, but the intrusion of the assault scene causes one to realize that Nola's three-way romance borders on promiscuity: Nola has leaped across some undefined line between romantic yearning and sexual abandon. One feels that Spike Lee's film and its success provided a new definition of black American talent that has long been ignored. The comic freshness and unpretentious approach to life in the film finally caused white producers to pay attention to the possibilities of black talent beyond the obvious formulas pursued by Hollywood. Lee was then given a larger budget and filmed *School Daze*, a social satire about black collegians in Georgia, a subject that promised a great deal in terms of exploring a long-ignored aspect of black American culture. As it turned out, *School Daze* was the sort of collegiate fantasy once identified with Paramount musicals of the thirties (*College Humor*, *College Swing*, *College Holiday*, etc.) only now, one saw black collegians absorbed in fraternity-sorority activities of such extraordinary frenzy that it soon became difficult (or impossible) to associate them with the groves of Academe. Spike Lee's attraction to certain aspects of the musical genre (the charmingly balletic dream sequence in *She's Gotta Have It*) was expanded in *School Daze*, as he delineated the semi-taboo subject of color prejudice within black society, in this case the Wannabees versus the Jigaboos, two competing sororities respectively populated by light or dark-skinned women students. If there is any other difference between them, it is that at least one Jigaboo girl, Rachel (played by Kyme), feels some tentative obligations toward studying. The antagonism between these two groups alerts the spectator's avid interest, because indeed, the theme of shades of pigmentation as a symbol of beauty among black Americans has been only rarely touched upon by Hollywood (in the two versions of *Imitation of Life*, for example).

However, after some brief, sharp exchanges of insults, the sororities' rivalry appears to be mainly based upon sexual competitiveness, and Lee adroitly sidesteps a dramatization of his touchy subject by staging a lively and rhythmic dance number entitled "Talkin' Bout Good And Bad Hair" in which the women sing out their feelings with splendid energy.

Although the number is longer than necessary, it remains the lyrical high point of the film, because two subsequent musical interludes either move to the edge of excess ("Cryin' Out For Love," in which a slinky quartet of mulatto Wannabees, clad in tight black-and-silver gowns, perpetuate the tradition of the black woman as lyric wanton) or plunge into calculated outrageousness (at a college dance, the students, stripped to bathing attire, do "Da Butt," which leaves nothing to the imagination and gives everything to the mobile pelvis).

The major premise of *School Daze* has nothing to do with intellectual pursuits, but concerns itself with the initiation of a group of pledges into a fraternity. One of these pledges is Darrell (Spike

Lee), nicknamed "Half-Pint," who, besides engaging in the ritualistic activities prescribed by Julian (Gian Carlo Esposito), the chapter president, is ordered to lose his virginity before he can be accepted. It is in his depiction of black fraternity life that Lee cleverly mixes reality (gleaned from his own memories of his days at Morehouse College in Atlanta) and good-humored fantasy. Lee's compelling sense of comic performance is embodied in Half-Pint's bewildered quest for manhood, and the character's amusing reactions (and appearance) hold one's attention more than the sociopolitical subplot about a militant student's desire to change the sophomoric views of the Greek students and their fake "macho" attitudes toward life.

This somber militant, Dap (Larry Fishburne), is also Half-Pint's cousin and the lover of Rachel. Dap's chief adversary is Julian, a light-skinned black, who is the lover of Jane, the glamorous leader of the Wannabees (Tisha Campbell). The fraternity is depicted as fun-loving, slightly sadistic (the members are all branded with an insignia), and amoral. The latter attribute is best illustrated when Julian convinces Jane to sleep with Half-Pint (as a favor). Afterwards Jane is dismissed by both men—a rather callous turnabout on the part of Half-Pint, which surprises the spectator, who has up to this point looked upon him as the moral center of the film. In the midst of *School Daze*, the entire atmosphere of Homecoming Week at Mission College becomes crazed and it is impossible to take its visions seriously. An anti-intellectual subtext runs through the film, and since this is the only film ever made about black collegians, and written, directed and acted by a black artist, it is surprising to be placed in a maelstrom of non-academic incidents. Some of these incidents lead off campus, as when Dap and some of his fellow students confront a group of ghetto toughs in a hamburger joint. There is a forceful hostility that is articulated here, an outburst of inner-city frustration and resentment toward the college boys that opens up another complete aspect of the plot, but the seriousness within this episode is dissolved by the comic dialogues and activities that follow.

The sole male image of educational attainment, a mediating class president (Greg Burge), is disparaged as an ineffectual aesthete. So the dreamlike sequence of misty-imaged morning, in which all of the opposing factions of Mission College come together on campus to hear Dap's exhortation to "Wake Up!" is a surprising (and unconvincing) culmination of the film: a figment of Lee's own very personal, collegiate reverie.

By the end of the decade, Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* was chosen as an official contender for the coveted Palme d'Or at the Cannes film festival, the first film by a black American director to com-

School Daze

pete in this position. However, it won only great praise, and later its showings in America caused innumerable discussions and arguments. Its fame seems assured, and now that all the hue and cry have subsided, Lee's personal, fantastic view of a black neighborhood in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, New York can rest on its uneasy laurels as a cinematic reflection of urban discontent.

The literary nostalgia of such writers as Betty Smith, Thomas Wolfe and, most eloquently, Alfred Kazin, have imbued Brooklyn with an elegiac melancholy and soft-hearted roughness. However, the history of *black* Brooklyn has not been documented in popular entertainment, so *Do the Right Thing* creates a milieu that thrives on its own mythologies. It is Spike Lee's imagined microcosm of black ghetto life: a neighborhood that swelters in summer heat and tolerates a ground-floor radio station where a disc-jockey dispenses rock anthems and commentary throughout the day. The buildings are real, though sometimes repainted, but the atmosphere is neo-real. (Oddly enough, it is a latter-day evocation of *Dead End*, where the sets were convincingly slum-like, enough to make Depression audiences feel more bereft, and Harlemites more ashamed.)

The central character is a young black man called Mookie (Spike Lee) who works as delivery and cleanup employee in Sal's Famous Pizzeria. Sal (Danny Aiello) is Italian-American, a Brooklynite to the core, with two grown sons, Vito (Richard Edson) and Pino (John Turturro). The relationship between Mookie and Sal is amiable, and Mookie contemptuously tolerates the overt racism of Vito, who hates the black encroachment on a formerly mixed neighborhood, and the black presence in general. Pino, slightly addled in personality, accepts Mookie as an equal, and resents Vito's bullying attitudes toward him. The cinematic image of Mookie is very persuasive. Lee has transmogrified himself into a visual icon of the ghetto: in carelessly worn garments, with baggy shorts from which thin legs end in fashionably oversized sneakers, he moves along the street with self-assured ease. In that very first view of Mookie's walk, the reality of the black ghetto is established. Lee's small face, and its bespectacled, bemused expression, with the flat-top haircut seen among black teenagers of the late 1980s captures the sort of EveryBlack who represents the carefree, oblique defensiveness of the dropout. Here is a type that *needs* clarification in the eyes of the general public, but unfortunately, there is little depth to Mookie's character. He proves to be an ineffectual father to a small child, and treats his estranged young Puerto Rican wife as a convenient sex-object.

The other characters that one sees in the neighborhood are all prototypes of lower-class blacks, particularly an alcoholic wanderer called "Da Mayor"; a trio of layabouts who act as dramatic (and comic) Chorus to the action; an elderly matron, "Mother Sister," who sees life from her win-

Do the Right Thing: Lee's imagined microcosm of black ghetto life.

dow sill; a hulking ghetto-blastite called "Radio Raheem," and a wild-eyed militant who has been deranged by racial outrage, referred to as "Buggin' Out." Lee treats all of these characters as symbols in what evolves as a street parable of violence. There is even a stuttering half-wit who tries to sell photos of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X to passers-by.

When Buggin' Out encourages a boycott of the pizzeria because Sal adorns his restaurant with photographs of white celebrities of Italian descent, the final confrontation erupts into rioting, arson, and death. All at once, the genial aspects of an asphalt pastorale with amusing vignettes are transformed into a political statement about interracial strife, but one that is very muddled. Sal smashes Raheem's radio with a baseball bat (an action highly satisfying to all who have suffered from such aural assaults on buses or subways throughout New York City); the ensuing violence by police and protestors is magnified when Mookie abruptly picks up an ashcan and smashes Sal's front windows. Since Mookie has never given any indication of political motivations, his defiant act seems an example of mere mob courage. It is too complex an action to remain unexplained (one is reminded of Polanski's little hood in *Two Men and a Wardrobe* or *Chinatown*, daring to strike behind the strength of bullies).

The destruction of Sal's pizzeria is not the solution to ghetto frustration, just as the riots of the 1960s in Watts, Detroit, and Harlem only eliminated the neighborly interracial structure of the black economy as well as black residences. It appears hardly likely that anyone in Mookie's neighborhood will open another pizzeria under black management (with photos of celebrated blacks on the walls), and the tragic undertones of the violence leave the spectator suspended. *Do the Right Thing*, it appears, shifts its point of view from semi-folk comedy (comments of the elderly trio; the humorous cultural conflicts between two Korean grocers and black customers; Raheem's radio battle with some Latin youths, etc.) to a cry for racial self-definition through violence. Unfortunately, Sal's essential humanism and his sense of propriety are more convincing than Mookie's sudden turnabout, and, when the film concludes with a sullen argument between Sal and Mookie (who demands his salary in front of the ruined pizzeria) the overall point is vague, indeed. The only thing really clear here is Spike Lee's inchoate anger, inspired perhaps by the actual occurrences of racism in Brooklyn in recent years. Yet the insistence upon realism in the depiction of black young people here only reveals a tragic lack of any possible future adjustments with the American white society. The white spectator is able to accept the varying moods of *Do the Right Thing* with relaxed equanimity—it is a "foreign" film, lively and challenging without carrying much real threat. To the black spectator, and certainly to black Brooklynites, the patterns of racist thinking are disturbingly similar on both sides of the geographical border between Bedford-Stuyvesant and Bensonhurst. It is revelatory to watch *Do the Right Thing* on a double bill with Paul Morrissey's *Spike of Bensonhurst* (about macho Italo-Americans) to gauge the parallel yahooisms.

The racial images in *Do the Right Thing*, for the black intelligentsia, are not far from what one can see throughout America's inner cities—images also reinforced by Hollywood films and television sitcoms. However, the *other* black dwellers of the same environment are forever missing from American screens, including Spike Lee's; they coexist with the Mookies, Buggin' Outs and Radio Raheems, but are capable of understanding that America offers more than opportunities for social protest. The black struggle against racism and discrimination has often led to contradictory philosophies (as far as W. E. B. DuBois vs. Booker T. Washington) and in Lee's choice of quotations from the speeches of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in an epilogue to *Do the Right Thing*, this counterpointing of ideologies epitomizes the film's double-edged views.

It is, apparently, a film in which Spike Lee had to make his personal statement about Brooklyn racism, camouflaged by street-smart raillery. Aside from Lee's Mookie and Danny Aiello as Sal, Gian Carlo Esposito (a fine character actor) as Buggin' Out represents a frightening exemplar of hysteria. In the rather thankless roles for the women, Joie Lee is sympathetic and thoroughly effective as Mookie's sensible sister, and Rosie Perez, as Tina, the abandoned wife, is exceptional not only for her portrait of stridently and justifiably profane indignation, but for an achingly pelvic dance routine under the titles that is correlative to the torrid climate permeating the film.

Robert Townsend's *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987) was a glorious spoof of racism among casting agents in the film industry, with its particular barbs aimed at the "blaxploitation" decade of the seventies. Townsend wrote the script and performed as the hero who struggles to find studio employment, only to encounter stereotyped interpretations of black Americans. The auditions for "Jive Time Jimmy's Revenge," and a satire on "The Black Acting School," where white teachers instruct black actors on the proper intonations of the ghetto dweller, are hilarious moments in a film whose savage anger is made more provocative by Townsend's mastery of ridicule. One sequence parodies the television critics who blithely offer the public their often vapid opinions, only the hosts here are two openly irreverent black hipsters who give top honors to an uproarious business called *Attack of the Street Pimps*.

The hero's entrapment between the comforts of a sensible family (including a wise, sharp-tongued grandmother and a worshipful kid brother) and the insensitive white casting agents is the basis of a very real Hollywood dilemma. Instead of the escaped slave superstud (*Mandingo*) or street hood sneering "Black" English ("I ain't be got no weapon!"), the hero visualizes himself as a black King Lear or Rambo. Occasionally, Townsend's humor stretches a bit thin (the hotdog salesmen and a black TV-Batman), but overall, *Hollywood Shuffle* remains the most sophisticated weapon of film satire against the pernicious stereotyping of black actors throughout the years.

An extension of Townsend's style is found in the first feature of Keenen Ivory Wayans, who also wrote and starred in *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka!*—a title that sums up the attitude of the black detective genre of *Shaft*, *Superfly*, *Hammer* and *Slaughter*. The humor is more heavy-handed than in Townsend's film, but Wayans knows the genre well and enthusiastically skewers all of its stereotypes to the extent of using three of its icons, Isaac Hayes, Bernie Casey, and Jim Brown, as crimebusters.

In *Any Ghetto U.S.A.*, Jack Spade (Wayans) is a war veteran who returns to find out that his brother has been murdered, and a white crime boss has supplied young black males with so much drug money that they have become addicted to wearing heavy gold chains; this "over-golding" causes their deaths. The effort of Jack Spade and his friends to rid the neighborhood of this scourge provides Wayans with enough comic-book activity to bolster the insane movements of the plot. One's response to the humor depends upon a familiarity with earlier black exploitation films, but there is enough wittiness in the absurdities to give enjoyment, and Damon Wayans (Keenan's brother), as a much be-

I'm Gonna Git You Sucka!

leaguered mobster reveals a unique comic talent, almost avant-garde in its effect. As he did in *Colors* (Dennis Hopper's cop-ghetto film), Damon Wayans possesses the sly, erratic madness of a black Larry Semon or Jimmy Savo, and it should prove interesting to see what develops for him in the cinema. In the meantime, Keenen Ivory Wayans and Robert Townsend represent the vanguard of comic actor-directors who have cast a gimlet eye upon the modes and manners too often inflicted by white Hollywood upon its darker brethren.

In a 1979 documentary, a black woman director, Debra Robinson, explored the difficulties black comediennes had in finding a place for themselves in show business (*I Be Done Been Was Is*). However, in 1985, Whoopi Goldberg had a meteoric rise from obscurity to super stardom on Broadway and in Hollywood. A brilliant satirist, Goldberg was discovered by the director Mike Nichols, who directed a one-woman show for her on Broadway and critics and audiences were astonished by the range of her comic and dramatic monologues. One sensed that Whoopi Goldberg has been inspired by the informal, satirical commentaries of Jackie "Moms" Mabley, and indeed, one of her earliest performances was an imitation of Mabley's stage-act. The critical praise given to Goldberg's Broadway show undoubtedly brought her to the attention of Steven Spielberg as a possible actress in his production of *The Color Purple*. Her debut in this film was unusual because it submerged her comic persona beneath the sentimental demands of its script, and it was not until her second feature, *Jumpin' Jack Flash* (1986), directed by Penny Marshall, that one could predict the boundaries of Goldberg's comic future. The script was a calculated effort to present her as a black female misfit, comically dressed in oversized garments, with her hair in African dreadlocks. She yelled, and widened her eyes in precarious situations, and responded to the circumstances of melodrama in the Hollywood screwball tradition. Indeed, Whoopi Goldberg, the intelligent comedienne, managed to overcome the stereotyped comic activities given to her in this film. Still, it was feared that, like all untamed comic geniuses, she might become trapped in this image of the black rag-doll in urban America. (There is very limited charm in this stereotype, and the humor was frantic, with little profane outbursts in the dialogue to keep her contemporary with

Whoopi Goldberg in *The Telephone*

Pryor and Murphy.) The facile comedy ideas were straight from television via the old slapstick routines of Mack Sennett, and it was disheartening that Whoopi Goldberg's individuality as a comedienne could not find a more realistic, subtler form of screen humor. Her next film, *Burglar*, was the same role all over again: in search of an easy vein of laughter, she remained a sexless clown (like Harry Langdon) on a cinematic roller coaster, one that avoided the profoundly satirical genius that Whoopi Goldberg possessed.

Then, somehow, a different approach to Whoopi Goldberg characterizations was attempted: an image of the black madwoman with a tragicomic aura. In *The Telephone* (1988), Goldberg was given an essentially one-woman vehicle, portraying a deranged actress who responded to imaginary characters through phone conversations—her phone, it is later revealed, is disconnected, and she murders the telephone repairman. It was a daring experiment, perhaps *too* daring for her fans, and too incongruous to be real. At one point, Goldberg's virtuosity was put to a severe test when she intoned "Sweet Molly Malone" with a pronounced brogue. The *possibility* that Whoopi Goldberg deserved a role in which her femininity could be expressed (romantically) was explored in a police thriller, *Fatal Beauty* (1987). One had earlier felt dis-

Whoopi Goldberg: top left in *Fatal Beauty,*
above in *Clara's Heart,*
and top right in *Ghost.*

appointed when her unseen white prospective love-interest was not the handsome male she glimpsed in a restaurant at the conclusion of *Jumpin' Jack Flash*. Hollywood's discomfort with interracial liaisons led to the choice of the British actor Jonathan Pryce as a more suitable partner for Whoopi instead of, say, Tom Cruise.* The final sequence of *Jumpin' Jack Flash* was the basis for extended discussions among black spectators at the time: the choice of a certain *type* of white male buddy for a black heroine was, indeed, a point of speculation.

In *Fatal Beauty*, as a narcotics agent named Rizzoli (there seems to be a tendency to give Whoopi Italian surnames), she worked with actor Sam Elliott (craggy, older, and vaguely Slavic as "Marshak"), and was able to implant a loving kiss upon him before his wounded body was taken off to the hospital.

Still another shift in Goldberg's screen image occurred in her subsequent work: under Robert Mulligan's direction, *Clara's Heart* (1988) added to the serious side of her personality as a West Indian governess to a disturbed upper-class white child. Goldberg's rainswept monologue about being sexually abused by her own son was heavily Freudian, but kept within emotional conviction. Andrei Konchalovsky's *Homer and Eddie* (1989) was a road movie in which Goldberg played a tough wanderer and asylum-escapee named Edwina Cervi (or "Eddie") who joins up with a retarded fellow, Homer (Jim Belushi). These two comic characters, both American grotesques, embarked upon a series of improbable adventures, with equally odd supporting characters. Here Eddie's madness and burst of lyrical behavior with Homer kept her thoroughly asexual, and it seemed inevitable that after she is

*It is ironic that Pryce seems to have an ambi-racial image for casting agents, and he was the center of controversy when his brilliant portrayal of a Eurasian in *Miss Saigon* was called into question by Asian performers.

fatally shot, Eddie's final remembrance should be an innocent waterfront dance with the childlike Homer.

Jerry Zucker's spectral comedy *Ghost* (1990), in which her interpretation of a harried medium was an inspired, hilarious achievement, gave Goldberg a chance to reaffirm her still untapped versatility. Richard Pearce's *The Long Walk Home* (1991) provided a long-overdue dramatization of the civil rights movement in Alabama of the sixties; in it Whoopi Goldberg's stoical housekeeper adheres to the black community's boycott of segregated bus travel. This is one of Goldberg's most impressive, controlled performances; in her restraint, there is a strength and dramatic wisdom not shown in her earlier screen work. Whoopi Goldberg is, at this time, the reigning black actress in American films; her metamorphosis from comic-grotesque to tragedienne has been one of the most exciting screen careers to behold, and she may enlarge the possibilities for long-neglected black artists to portray roles which define the importance of black women in the daily dramas at the center of ethnic struggle and survival.

The Long Walk Home

The rarefied, almost mythical world of contemporary jazz musicians, of whatever background, has seldom been dramatized with authenticity in American cinema, but in every film that attempted to show this milieu, black musicians were an indispensable part of its population. The recent success of Bertrand Tavernier's *Round Midnight* (1987) revived interest in the black jazz musician as tragic hero, and Dexter Gordon's authoritative presence (basically playing himself) threw into relief the stereotypes of jazz people that had prevailed for several decades. Such works as *Young Men with a Horn* (1950) and *Pete Kelly's Blues* (1955) perpetrated the hoary image of the Southern black musicians' influence upon white jazzmen, either by an aging musician nobly teaching a white youngster the modes of blues-trumpet (Juano Hernandez in the former film), or Ella Fitzgerald effortlessly spreading blues vocals over a white audience (in the latter). Tavernier's breakthrough, with a Frenchman's outlook on black jazz expatriates in Paris, reminded one of the rich cinematic material to be found in jazz cinema, an untapped source of fascinating dramas. There was always a drug-tinged haze around jazz circles and the old Motion Picture Code prevented this aspect of reality from being shown onscreen. As a result, the efforts of directors to deal realistically with American jazz people mainly emphasized psychological malaise: Cassavetes's *Too Late Blues* (1962) and Leo Penn's *A Man Called Adam* (1966) with Sammy Davis, Jr. as a tormented jazz trumpeter. The best film about the tribulations of a jazz artist during the sixties was Herbert Danska's *Sweet Love Bitter* (1967) in which Dick Gregory gave an inimitable performance as a musician destroyed by the disillusionment of exploitation, racism, and dependence upon drugs as a panacea for despair. The film was not shown at the time of its completion (1960) because it used some very mild profanity, and showed the smoking of marijuana and the effects of hard drugs. It also portrayed an interracial love affair as well as the patronage of an aristocratic white woman toward black jazzmen. This latter personage was an oblique reference to the friendship and aid to musicians (notably Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk) extended by the Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter.

This gracious woman was also personified as a mysterious, slightly sinister figure in Cassavetes's film and also appeared enigmatically in Clint Eastwood's *Bird* (1989). The attention given to this film biography of Charlie Parker was directly attributa-

Forest Whitaker in *Bird*

ble to the acclaim for *Round Midnight*, but the challenges for authentic recreation of the jazz-into-bebop era were formidable, indeed. What evolved was a dark tale of emotional and creative disintegration, and Charlie Parker's elusive personality could not be captured either in the script or in the bland geniality of Forest Whitaker in the title role. More than these, the music of Birdland and The Royal Roost never quite came to life (although some of Parker's original sax solos were used, the backgrounds were changed, and one longed to hear at least one chorus of oo-bop-shebam). The characterizations of the musicians themselves, in look, style, and language of the postwar period were so remote that the character of Parker's white wife, Chan, became most vivid: it was the tale of Mrs. Bird, with Parker in the background—a jazz-tease for devotees of the genre.

Along with such experiments of white directors with jazz cinema, two independent productions by black writer-directors caught the attention of the public. Larry Clark's *Passing Through* (1977) was a dynamic, cleverly imaged presentation of a black saxophonist, Warmack (Nathaniel Taylor), and his struggle to maintain his artistic integrity in the corrupt world of recording companies and gangster violence. The cinematic style of the film mixed color images in a sort of jazzmania (red piano fingers over blue-streaked keys, reminiscent of Gjon Mili's avant-garde photography) and Clark's drama is interspersed with political references to the civil rights riots and the tragedy of the Vietnam war. Warmack's musical talents are encouraged by an elderly black, Papa Harris (played by the veteran actor, Clarence Muse), who is used as a symbol of black social survival and linked to African cultural heritages. As a first feature, *Passing Through* attempted to encompass both the burgeoning creative consciousness of Warmack, as well as the sounds of authentic jazz by Eric Dolphy, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, and Grover Washington on the sound track; it remains an invaluable film-outcry.

Spike Lee's *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), with its austere jazz threnodies and inciting images, promised to supply a contemporary involvement with jazz themes and black jazzmen. However, the film's structure was, in a sense, a familiar coming-of-age odyssey of a black musician, Bleek Gilliam (Denzel Washington, in an uneasy performance), a Brooklyn boy who has been encouraged from childhood to become a trumpet player. Once again, the story places the music in the background (as in Eastwood's *Bird*), heard but not always capturing the ears and interest of the spectator. The sounds of John Coltrane are aligned to the music of contemporary jazz artists (Terry Blanchard, Branford Marsalis) and yet the plot intercedes constantly until one simply complies with it. The central dramatic dilemma is an erotic one: whether the grown-up Bleek should choose the love of a brown-skinned woman, Indigo (Joie Lee) or that of a light-skinned mulatto, Clarke (Cynda Williams). In short, the black-man-as-stud is presented again, but here it reaches heights of absurdity (but without the humor) found in certain films of the blaxploitation era (*Melinda*, for example).

Once one is resigned to not seeing a true film about the world of jazz, it is easier to appreciate whatever merits remain. There are some excellent dialogue exchanges between Bleek and his fellow musicians, particularly a rival saxophonist, Shadow (Wesley Snipes) and an outspoken pianist, Left-Hand Larry (Gian Carlo Esposito), and these particular characters deserve more attention. An exciting harangue between Bleek and his two women-adversaries, cutting back and forth between bedrooms, is a dramatic extension of the color theme among black women as sex symbols, and it is the most powerful episode in the film. Spike Lee's portrayal of Bleek's incompetent and boastful manager, Giant, is a variation on his former personae, but oddly endowed here with superhuman physical powers, enough to survive a bone-crushing beating by several Neanderthal hoodlums.

Denzel Washington and Spike Lee: *Mo' Betta Blues*

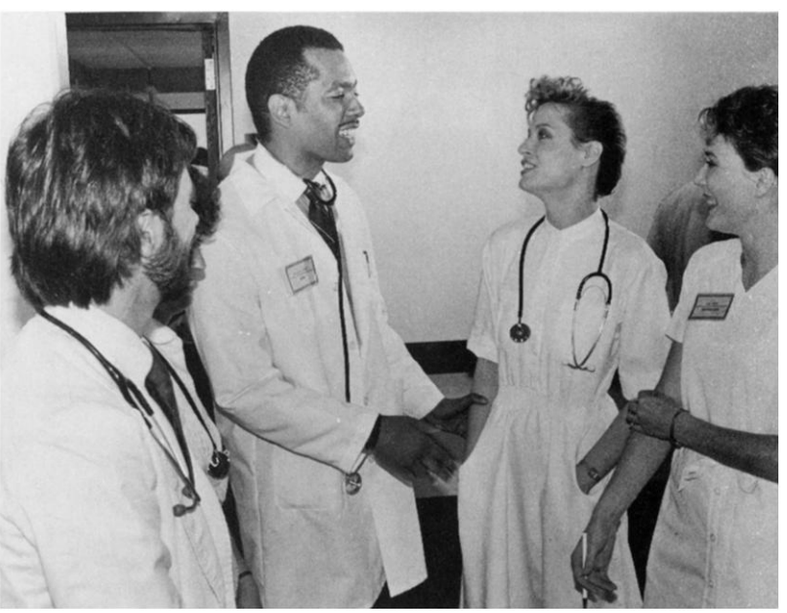
The usual drug scene is absent altogether, which is, perhaps, too obvious a move away from certain realities, but Bleek does decline into the creative doldrums, only to survive, like his father before him, as a married man encouraging his son toward jazz. Amusingly, the beauteous Clarke survives his rejection and reappears as an acclaimed jazz singer with Shadow's group of white-audience-oriented musicians. When one hears her interpretation of one of W. C. Handy's less fortunate blues, it is an encounter with the art of the caterwaul raised to a pinnacle of perfection. On the other hand, Bill Lee's score, in the dramatic sequences bridging the jazz, has the proper mordant-melodic touch that occurs all too infrequently within the plot.

Mo' Better Blues is less abrasive than Spike Lee's former sortie into ghetto upheavals, and a tentative move toward an intimate character study. However, his forthcoming film promises more misadventures among the Bensonhurst set, leaving one only to hope that someday we will see this talented director moving away from these territories, where "jungle fevers" cannot be assuaged by the tepid effects of cinematic images alone.

Another new wave of black American directors engulfed the screens at the beginning of the nineties. Charles Lane's *Sidewalk Stories* (1989) was an unusual debut film: a silent comedy about the homeless people of New York's Greenwich Village, where a lonely black street artist (Lane, himself) is bullied by other street vendors and ignored by the majority of passersby. Through a series of circumstances, the artist becomes the father-figure to an abandoned two-year-old girl whose father has been murdered. Here was a cinematic anomaly—a gentle use of visual technique alone, in an era of Dolby sound. Lane's brilliant editing indicated his enthusiasm for the achievements of Chaplin and Keaton, and his own performance was an extraordinary evocation of the neorealistic efforts of black silent film experiments like Richard Maurice's *Eleven P.M.* In addition, *Sidewalk Stories* was a film of social comment, so that when sound suddenly broke through at the end, its utterances were indictments, adding deeper pathos to the earlier dramatic pantomimes.

Wendell B. Harris's *Chameleon Street* won the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival in 1990; it is a sardonically witty portrayal of a real-life black impostor named Douglas Street, who successfully impersonated a surgeon and a lawyer before being arrested. This hero, a social chameleon, is enacted by Harris, an attractive individual with a Wellesian tone of voice, and his bravura performance gives the film a level of sophistication worthy of Hollywood's best urbane comedies of the thirties. The cynical undertones of *Chameleon Street* endow the character of Street with a metaphoric quality: the lack of a specific identity for the black man, due to the continuous stereotyping of his image, often leads him to erase one personality and trade it for one more acceptable to white society. The perverse assumptions of Harris's portrayal lend the story a unique contribution, a new image of the intellectual of *connerie*. Street, as one sees him, constantly reveals different aspects of his personality, and it is boredom with his wife and fam-

Wendell B. Harris in *Chameleon Street*



ily members and a unrelenting quest for money that drives him to his daring and ingenious deceptions. Neither is he above lecturing a boorish white man (who insults him) on the etymology of the word "fuck" and its usages, in the tradition of Cyrano (before being knocked unconscious), nor wearing a Beast costume to a ball, inspired by Cocteau's film, and speaking like Pépé Le Moko. The macabre outrageousness of Street's daring evokes uneasy laughter: as a fake surgeon, he performs an operation, commenting upon the patient's navel (an "innie" or an "outie") and exclaiming, 'I can't *believe* the amount of blood in this woman!" Even as he is led away for a second prison term, Street gives the spectator a wry glance, as if daring anyone to guess his next deception.

Reginald Hudlin's *House Party* successfully caught some of the anarchic energies of black teenagers, merging upper- and lower-middle-class types in an unidentified suburbia. The purpose of the film was to make a lyrical comedy, dramatizing some of the experiences described in Hudlin's short film (same title) made in film school at Harvard. It is, to an extent, an evocation of Hudlin's high-school memories, and bears comparison to Michael Schultz's splendid *Cooley High* (1975), still the best black American film about inner-city adolescents. The most outstanding aspects of *House Party* are the casting of Christopher Reid as the hero, Kid; the rousing dance sequence when Kid and his best friend, Play (Christopher Martin), are challenged to perform by two skeptical girls; and the comic performance of Robin Harris as Kid's father. What prevents the film from becoming a minor masterpiece are the tendencies to exaggerate Kid's trio of bullies, who seem to be out of a film like *Truck Turner* and definitely not highschoolers, and the overplayed obnoxiousness of white policemen. The moments of social satire are sharply etched: one girl, Sharane (A. J. Johnson), lives in the projects with a family comprised of television-dazed layabouts addicted to Kool-Aid, while her best friend, Sidney (Tisha Campbell), lives in a comfortable upper-class home across town, obviously the light-skinned daughter of professionals. As a realistic view of black teenagers of the nineties, one finds the men to be somewhat caricatured in looks, but their language is realistic: sexually overt and the genes aloft. The brilliant dance sequence is tragically sabotaged by intrusive editing, so that only the liveliness of the performers sustains the number: one longs for the camera to simply stand still. Another sequence, in which Kid and Sidney walk to her home after a party, moves the film toward a welcome coda of reality, as they talk about their college expectations and her parents' jobs. For all of the frivolity in the film, Hudlin does manage some serious moments like this one; also, when Kid sees his work-worn, exhausted father asleep, one is reminded again of Schultz's film, where the single mother, bone-tired, falls asleep in a kitchen chair, too weary to punish an errant child.

Charles Burnett's first two features *Killer of Sheep* (1977) and *My Brother's Wedding* (1984)

House Party

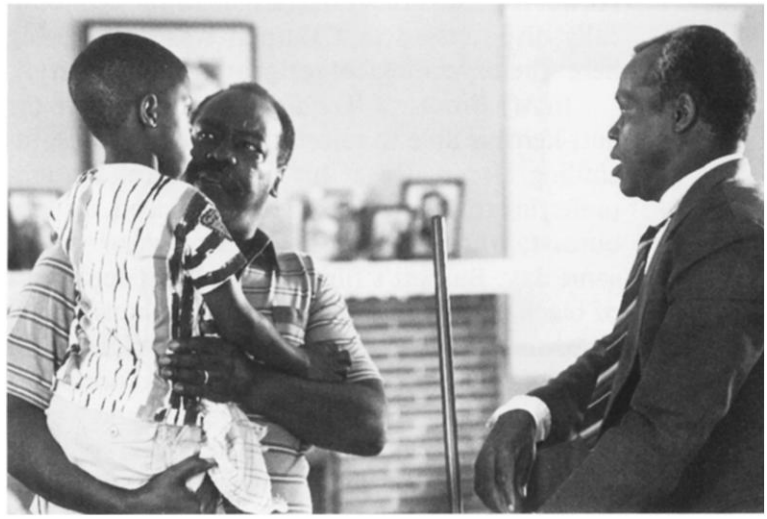
were set in the black community of South Central Los Angeles and offered slice-of-life views of the working class, characterized by a certain rootless, despondent attitude of its male protagonists toward life in general. In a way, they were almost plotless films, but one felt the reality in each character's attitudes, and the casual, emotionless delivery of dialogues. One's sympathies were often displaced; in *Killer of Sheep*, for example, the disgruntled husband, a slaughterhouse worker, was often exasperating and incomprehensible in his behavior. However, it was the utter fatigue of the economically dispossessed that Burnett was dramatizing here: the psychological resignations of poverty.

In *My Brother's Wedding*, Pierce, the hero (or anti-hero) is able to reject all family loyalties, including attendance at his brother's celebration, preferring to pay respects to his best friend, a genial outcast, whose funeral happens to occur on the same day. Burnett's films are excellent depictions of black neighborhoods, their streets, houses, dialects, and a certain lonely cityscape-by-night, quite timeless and gentle. The films require a spectator's patience because the moods are pensive and worlds away from the overt violence portrayed in commercial films, or television's conventional images of blacks at home.

Bill Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1984) is set in the same area as Burnett's works, and deals with the same sort of people. The husband-philanderer in Woodberry's film is a likable fellow, but his frustration about his unemployment and dependency upon his wife's earnings drive him into smouldering anger. Sometimes this anger is represented by his bullying behavior toward his children, or, in one of the film's most electric sequences, by arguments with his wife. The argument in *Bless Their Little Hearts* is one of the great examples of neorealist acting in black American cinema: the reality of the performances cannot be denied because of the film's improvisatory quality. Burnett and Woodberry are friends and have worked on each other's film; they have created a certain naturalistic "style" in their films, trying to master the dramatic sameness of black urban struggles where people might wither in a holocaust of unfulfilled dreams.

To Sleep With Anger (1990) is the first film by Burnett to reach an international audience, and it operates in the same environment as his other works, but with the added level of folk symbolism, provoking one's imagination toward an unexplored aspect of black family life. The story concerns the negative effects that occur when a long-absent friend from the Deep South, Harry (Danny Glover), suddenly visits Gideon (Paul Butler), an elderly retiree who lives with his family in Los Angeles. Gideon is contented to putter about in his vegetable garden and tend to his chickens, while his wife, Suzie (Mary Alice) holds midwifery sessions for neighborhood couples. Harry's expansive personality and gleaming smiles revive old Southern memories that Suzie, Gideon and some of their friends, especially Hattie (Ethel Ayler), (an old flame of Harry's) would rather forget. Harry's presence also causes dissension on the part of Gideon's two married sons, particularly the younger one, called Babe Brother (Richard Brooks), and the longer Harry remains in Gideon's household, gathering his old cronies around for parties and celebration, a pall of sickness and emotional upheavals become apparent. Eventually, the two sons clash physically and Suzie is wounded while breaking up their struggle. Ironically, Harry's sudden disappearance from their lives is caused by an accident from a source that he superstitiously feared from the day of his arrival.

The familiar interplay of the characters is given a dimension of tragicomedy throughout the film. Submerged fears and ghostlike secrets among displaced black Southerners have become a noticeable theme, particularly in the dramas of August Wilson, and Burnett's cinematic interweaving of superstitions adds to the depth of the overall film. (Harry's fear of the child who sweeps broom-dust on his shoes and his penchant for preferring to sleep on the floor are a part of such cautionary black axioms regarding bad luck or evil omens: an open umbrella indoors; a hat or mirror on the bed, etc. Suzie is only mildly embarrassed when she uses oils and sprinkles fetishes on Gideon's sickbed.) The ensemble acting is Chekhovian in its richness. Glover personifies an insidiously guileful figure; Mary Alice's calm watchfulness and Sheryl Lee Ralph's frustrated wife to Brooks's truculent rebel are particularly admirable. *To Sleep With Anger* is not like any of the black American films of recent years, and it bears the stamp of an original vision about a certain way of life. Above all, it has a humanistic outreach, identifiable to everyone, and in

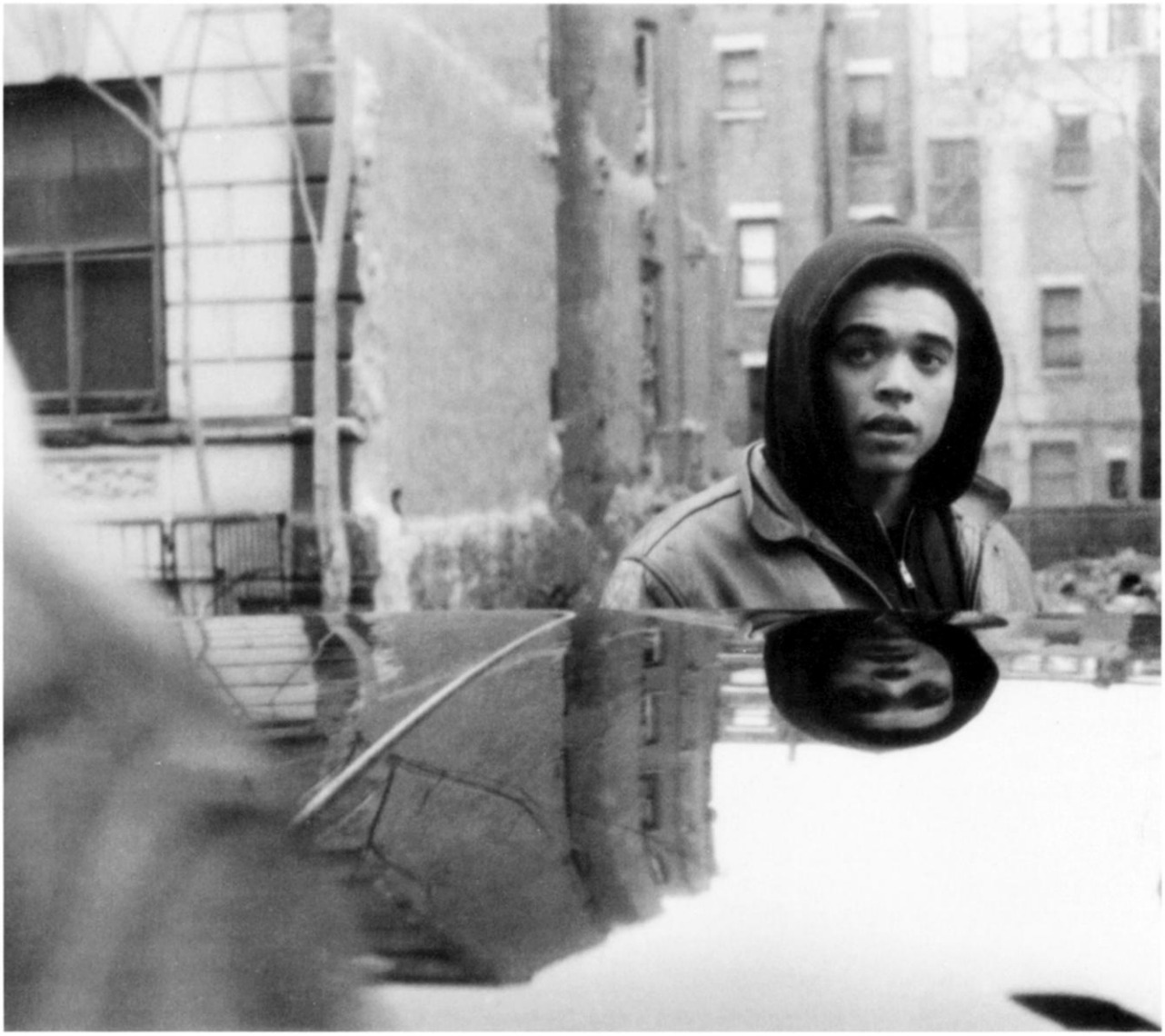


To Sleep with Anger: top left, Harry and his cronies invade the household; top right, mother and rebellious son; above, the grandson who brings about Harry's demise, with his grandfather and Harry.

the film's almost darkly comic conclusion, somehow even the discordant practicing of a child trumpeter (heard from time to time) strikes a hopeful, symbolic, final note.

It was only a matter of time before the black American cinema's new wave would produce a director who could release all of the tenets of neorealism into public view. Norman Loftis's first feature, *Small Time* (1990) is an outstanding perusal of a petty criminal, Vince (Richard Barboza, in a dynamic performance), who preys upon his victims as a mugger and pickpocket in the streets and subways of New York City. Vince is in his twenties, illegitimate, poorly educated, and full of defiant ambition. He shuns drug-dealing and responds to the physical challenges and adventure of the streets ("One way or the other, I'm gonna get mine!"). The patterns of Vince's existence are told in flashback from a prison cell, full of his remorse and inability to express his humanity to others. One sees in the film a grippingly detailed insight into the legions of the bitter and the damned among America's delinquent youth. *Small Time* brings all of the power of Pasolini's world into American life, and it disturbs the spectator with its unrelenting truth. There will undoubtedly be some who may perceive the film as an addition to negative images of blacks, but *Small Time* is beyond this misconception. It clarifies the mysterious, violent codes of the street, where survival supplants intelligences and ordinary moral values, where death is as commonplace and disposable as a wad of chewed gum.

Loftis, a university professor, struggled to bring his film to completion without outside help, and with his actors performing without salary. He was determined to bring a tragic vision to Vince's self-



Small Time

destructive life and dramatize the lives of those for whom society has no refuge. In one of the most memorable episodes in *Small Time*, Vince confronts his girlfriend Vicki (Carolyn Kinebrew) when she confides that she hopes to follow a singing career, and he deliberately humiliates and degrades her ambitions. This sequence is an unforgettable depiction of the fascistic "macho" image that can destroy male-female understandings. The codes of manhood and leadership are also corrupted by Vince's companions and the denouement leads to tragedy that is commonplace in an environment where unemployment is rampant, rap is a means of communication, and nightfall is the time for retributions. In direct contrast to Burnett's film, Loftis's realism is crude and brutal, alienated from the humanism of poetic naturalists: it reveals an original American film talent.

The nineties hold promise for black film-makers, with independent work coming from many sources. New works by Bill Duke, Spike Lee, Melvin Van Peebles, and Julie Dash are ahead, and all the watchers in the dark are hopeful: the cinematic mutual portrait for black and white America is still too diffuse, undefined, as if struggling to reveal some new kind of drama that can enlighten and clarify the dark paths and the lighter ones of this interracial society.

Scott MacDonald

Illuminations

An Interview with Andrew Noren

Andrew Noren has been making contributions to North American independent film since the mid-sixties. Unfortunately, as interesting as his early films seem to have been, few survive—the result of a fire in 1970. Noren began with a Godard-inspired experimental narrative, *A Change of Heart* (1965, lost in the fire), and then—perhaps as a reaction to his day job as an apprentice editor at a network news department[1]—began making film characterized by long, continuous shots. *The New York Miseries* (ca. 1965 to ca. 1967) was made up of single-take, 100-foot rolls of 16mm film (each approximately three minutes long) in which Noren documented "abasolutely every aspect of my life." Though *The New York Miseries* was destroyed in the fire, Noren's quest to capture his own experience was dramatized in Jim McBride's *David Holzman's Diary* (1967). L. M. Kit Carson, who played David Holzman, later described Noren and his influence on McBride: "The un-camera-shy Noren—in America, where most film-makers either fear or worship the camera—this Noren who unscrewed the lens from the camera and pushed his fingers into the guts of the camera while it was running, he was onto something. . . . And when Jim talked to Noren now, Noren kept kicking Jim's imagination in the ass."[2] An interview McBride and Carson had conducted with Noren had already raised the question of cinema "truth," a central topic not only of *David Holzman's Diary*, but of *Say Nothing* (1965), the one surviving instance of a series of 30-minute, single-shot films. *Say Nothing* is an "interrogation" of an actress/character by the film-maker that hovers between fiction and documentary.

In 1968, Noren finished *The Wind Variations*—a meditation on the winter light flowing through two windows, as it is modulated by the window curtains blowing in the breeze—and *Huge Pupils*, the first of a series of films that have become known as *The Adventures of the Exquisite Corpse*. *Huge Pupils* is a compilation of domestic moments, often tender, sometimes meditative, consistently lovely, and sometimes startling in their openness about sexuality. Other than Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* (1967), I know of no instance where a viewer shares so openly and directly in a film-maker's experiences with a lover.

Since the completion of *Huge Pupils* (reworked in 1977), Noren has completed four sections of *The Adventures of the Exquisite Corpse*: *False Pretenses* (1974), *The Phantom Enthusiast* (1975), both currently out of distribution being reworked, and the two most recent films: *Charmed Particles* (1978) and *The Lighted Field* (1987). Increasingly, Noren's interest is light itself, as it is captured and manipulated by camera and film-maker. After his

exploration of color in *The Wind Variations*, *Huge Pupils*, and *False Pretenses*, Noren returned to black and white. Of course, a number of contemporary independents have done remarkable work with black and white (Su Friedrich and Peter Hutton, for example), but if one thinks of the movie camera as an instrument with which a film-maker can compose and perform visual music, Noren may well be the most accomplished visual master musician we have. *The Lighted Field* reveals Noren at the peak of his form: the film is a visual phantasmagoria—exquisite, scintillating, sensual, sometimes nearly overhwelming.

Say Nothing and *The Wind Variations* are available from Filmmakers' Cooperative in New York; *Charmed Particles* and *The Lighted Field* from the Museum of Modern Art Circulating Film Library.[4] My interview with Noren was conducted in an unusual way. Once he had agreed to do an interview, Noren asked me to send him a list of questions, which I did in the summer of 1990. He labored for some months on answers, and we worked together, by mail and phone, condensing and refining the interchange for *Film Quarterly*. A longer version will be available in volume 2 of *A Critical Cinema* (now in preparation for California Press).

Notes

1. Noren continues to support himself by working in news: he is a researcher at Sherman Grinberg, a leading film library in New York City that supplies news footage for film and video documentaries and news shows.
2. Carson, introduction to the screenplay of *David Holzman's Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), pp. vii-ix.
3. To my knowledge, this interview has not been published.
4. Filmmaker's Cooperative has one other early Noren film, *Scenes from Life: Golden Brain Mantra* (1972), a double projection that "was intended as mantra, to run perpetually, viewer to enter/leave at any point. Originally B&W on color stock. On occasion I provided live piano accompaniment, extempore, à la "perils of . . . " (letter to author, 4/4/89). The imagery of both projections is of buildings exploding, in slow motion, forward and reverse. I assume the imagery is excerpts from early footage of nuclear tests.

Interview

When I learned you're originally from Santa Fe, and that you continue to visit New Mexico regularly, I was surprised. It helps account for your fascination with light, but I'm amazed that you've not used that section of the country as a subject for a film.

The light there had a great influence on me and still does. There's a sense in which it made me. I was drawn to it very strongly, early in my life, a natural and very powerful attraction. An early memory is of sitting under a cottonwood tree behind my parents' house, September afternoon light of great clarity with a wind blowing—you know how cottonwood leaves shiver and tremble in the wind. I sat there watching the light and the leaf shadows dancing on the dust, listening to the wind in the leaves. It was my first movie and a great one. I was bewitched by it.

At night out there the stars are so vivid and immense that the existence of other suns and other worlds is made very apparent, commonplace. I couldn't have expressed it at the time, but I came to realize back then that light is alive and intelligent . . . the living thought of the sun, you might say . . . and what could be more intelligent than the sun? There's a very real sense, a very literal, unmystical sense in which this world and everything in it is made of the sun and made by it. We are part of it. So my interest in light is quite natural; there's nothing esoteric about it. It's been one of the great passions of my life.

Were movies an early interest?

Yes. At the time I lived in New Mexico it was still very wild, as though the twentieth century hadn't happened yet . . . in spite of Los Alamos. I didn't get to see many films, but I loved them. The communication of thoughts by means of pictures interested me very early. I taught myself how to read by means of comic books, studying the pictures and then asking what the words meant. I was fascinated by the way that words, which are literal pictures themselves, form pictures on the imaginary screen of the mind; and fascinated by spoken words and by sound itself and by music for the same reason, their power to conjure pictures. Radio and

comics were most important to me. I was a passionate fan of "The Shadow" and of Krazy Kat. Later on, I fought my way to books and records in quantity and devoured them; I was starving for them. Blake and Stravinsky, Scriabin and Raymond Chandler, Swedenborg and Django Reinhardt, John Donne and Jerry Lee Lewis, Yeats and Wolfman Jack from down on the border, who blasted out the international rock and roll beat to the backwoods.

When did you come to New York?

The mid-sixties. Left home and caught the first thing smoking for the imperial city, where I hoped to find fame, money and the love of beautiful women . . . all of which have continued to elude me . . . just kidding, all of which I found in one degree or another.

How did you support yourself?

Got a job in the news department of one of the television networks as an apprentice editor. And I started making films. At a certain age, anything in the world seems possible, and I leapt into it without a second thought. My first film was *A Change of Heart*, 16mm, black and white, sound, feature-length, much influenced by *Breathless*. I worked in the news department during the day and worked on the film at night and on weekends, a pattern which continues to this day. My first show came about through Louis Brigante, who worked beside me in the news department and who was associated with *Film Culture* and knew Jonas Mekas. He was a very kind and good person who helped many young film-makers. Jonas at that time was showing a lot of independent features, like *Shadows*, *Guns of the Trees*, *Twice a Man*, and *The Flower Thief*, and a great many other things in the various fugitive venues of the Cinematheque, which was literally at that time a fly-by-night operation. Sometimes the location would change from week to week with Jonas dodging corrupt cops, avaricious fire marshalls looking for payoffs, and various other harassments. It was a true guerilla activity. Through his "Movie Journal" column in *The Village Voice*, Jonas was revolutionary commandante, operating from the hills, striking at night and vanishing before the "authorities" could get there. It was exciting.

Also, I worked at the Filmmakers' Coop for a while, and it was interesting because I got to meet many film-makers. There was much exchange of ideas and clash of raging egos. For a while at least, there was a strong sense of revolutionary possibility, that anything could happen and was likely to happen. A rough and unrefined situation in many ways. At that time there were no university courses in avant-garde film, no doctoral candidates, no wildest dreams of tenured positions. With a few exceptions, most were poor, cold, and hungry, not to mention insulted and injured and angry. I remember discussions about whether to buy film or food. There were also dilettantes as there always are: rich kids looking for something to do.

Are there film-makers you especially remember? Did you know Brakhage? Frampton?

Brakhage would descend on New York from the mountains once a year or so, grandiloquent and Promethean, lightning bolts in one hand and film cans in the other, talking everyone under the table —what a talker! And in general burning the place to the ground. It's impossible to overestimate his influence on absolutely everyone: you could run, but you couldn't hide. I remember thinking that *Mothlight* was one of the best films I'd ever seen, and I still think so. I was very impressed by Michael Snow and Joyce Wieland, who were both hilariously intelligent, clear-minded, and highly elevated. They couldn't help but laugh, and it was very contagious. They loved jokes and puns. I often felt they were on the verge of levitation by laughter.

Harry Smith interested me also. I spent many hours back then puzzling over *Heaven and Earth Magic*. He'd drop by the Coop from time to time in various states of altered awareness and was often brilliant in conversation; Cabbala and Bach, peyote songs and Haida masks, string games and dreamtime, riddles of the Rosy Cross. He was tiny, hunched, gnomic, wizardly, and I was young enough to be in awe of his occult erudition.

Hollis Frampton I met through Michael Snow. He and I had next to nothing in common, and so I saw very little of him.

Jack Smith was around a lot. He was at the height of his infamy then, because of *Flaming Creatures*. A strange figure . . . tall, gawky, long-beaked, stork-like. I didn't care for *Flaming Creatures*, but I'd often go to his slide show/performance at the Plaster Foundation of Atlantis, which was wherever Jack happened to be living at the time. They were often wonderful. There was absolutely no demarcation between what was "perfor-

mance'' and his ''real'' life. He was notorious for taking hours getting started . . . in fact things never really did get started. He just sort of lived, and you could share that. He would show things that he'd dragged in off the street, play his favorite records, read aloud from books and newspapers, musing and brooding. You had the feeling that he'd be doing the same thing whether there was an audience or not. He was very political in the truest sense, and the only true socialist I ever met. *The Secret of Rented Island* and *Sacred Landlordiam of Lucky Paradise* were political art of a very high order.

I'm unclear about the chronology of your work, but from what you've said to me, there are a good many films, made at the beginning of your activity as a film-maker, that no longer exist. I remember you telling me about a number of early single-shot films, made as a series.

A lot of my earlier films were destroyed accidentally in 1970; I was working in film as early as 1965. I made *A Change of Heart* then, a long narrative film with sound, and *Say Nothing*, which still survives. I did several similar one-take, 30-minute films. One was an ''interview'' with a former concentration camp guard; another was an interview with a pair of twin brothers who were idiot-savants; and a number of other things in that format. Also, a very long film, *The New York Miseries*, which was made up of one-take, three-minute, 100-foot sections. This was the precursor of *The Exquisite Corpse* and was inspired in a way by the Lumière brothers, by Balzac, whom I was reading at the time, and also by news reportage. One of my first film fascinations was with newsreels. I was crazy about them. This was before television, if you can imagine that, and it was a very different world indeed because of that. I think what attracted me was that the people in them were not ''acting,'' or so it was supposed to seem. This was the real stuff, a window on the way things really were in the Big World, which I was dying to get to. It was thrilling actuality, glares and flashes of ''reality,'' what people really *did*. And I loved the style—simple, straightforward, direct—and the basic idea of ''witness'': eyes and ears of the world you might say, Buddha-like, non-judgmental eye on suffering and on joy. Every conceivable human emotion would be engaged in the seven or eight minutes of the format. And they were strangely innocent, elegant, and severe. The cameramen and editors were studio-trained and knew all the tricks of classical composition and montage (''Russian cutting,'' they called it). Newsreels were an endless source of innocent, unintentional surrealism. Sex, disguised, and death, made plain, were the great themes. Buñuel himself once said that on his best day he couldn't hope to create images as bizarre as one could see every day in the newsreels.

The Lighted Field

What was The New York Miseries*?*

The New York Miseries was meant to be a personal ''newsreel,'' to document absolutely every aspect of my life, starting with the small domestic things and then moving out into the larger social context. I would try to shoot a 100-foot roll each week, if I could afford to buy and develop a roll—I was very poor. I filmed virtually every person that I knew then; I filmed family, landlord, employer, police. And I filmed myself cooking, eating, sleeping, lovemaking. I filmed in the supermarket, bank, and my workplace . . . you get the idea. Each roll was sort of a core-sample extracted directly from the heart of my life. The style was very simple and straightforward—minimum of artifice. I would simply focus on the situation, turn on the camera and let the roll run out. I was naive enough to believe that there was an objective ''truth'' that could be ''captured'' in this way. I later accepted ''ver-

sion," instead of truth. There's some commentary on this period in my life in the published screenplay of *David Holzman's Diary*, by Jim McBride.

Another project that occupied a lot of my time then was a script for a feature. The working title was *The Big Picture*, and of course, there was no chance of it getting made, but it still interests me in a way. The basic idea was simple enough: a movie crew shooting a movie about a movie crew that was shooting a movie about a movie crew that was shooting . . . film within a film within a film to infinity. I was also working on several other scripts at that time as well. It was the next best thing to actually making the films.

Were there other kinds of work?

I worked with loops for a while, using found footage. I did some cut-up films under the influence of Burroughs/Gysin. I would raid the waste containers at the Film Center Building and you could find thousands of feet of imperfect prints, rejects of all kinds: "educational" films, nature documentaries, pornography, military training films, everything. So I took all of this material and cut it up at random into uniform lengths—I think it was 24-frame sections—and then put the pieces into a large box and tossed them until any selection would be totally random. Then without looking to identify the pieces, I would splice them all together and recut the whole thing, starting in the middle of the original 24 frame piece, jumping the first splice, and ending in the middle of the next 24 frame piece. Then I would re-cut and re-toss these pices and randomly splice them together so that each piece was now 12 frames long and so on. I ended up with shots that were about four frames long and thousands of splices. When it was physically impossible to continue I would print the result. This was very laborious and time-consuming, needless to say, and very difficult to print, but they were interesting, especially the relation of the sound to the picture.

Anyway, all of the early films were shown, usually once or twice, at the Cinematheque when it was in the basement of the Wurlitzer Building on 41st Street. If my memory serves, this would be around 1965-66.

So far as I know, Say Nothing *is the earliest of your films still in distribution. It's an unusual single-shot film, 30 minutes long, and dramatic. Could you talk about the genesis of that project?*

Many fascinations were at work there. I was interested in the idea of the "screen test" as a form in itself and wanted to work with that. Also, I had a mischievous interest in subverting the *cinéma-vérité* ideas that had such currency then. Godard's definition of film as "truth 24 times a second" was much quoted. One of the first things I ask the actress in the film is, "Does the camera lie?" And then, "Do you lie?" The answer is, "Yes." I was playing with that and was also fascinated with the idea of identity or personality being a series of masks—a young man's fascination—and I was curious to see if it were possible to set up a mask-removal procedure, and finally discover the "real" person behind all the smoke and mirrors that constitute an "official" personality. Another interest was in interrogation as a form, "confession" extracted under duress, the Truth.

How well did you know that woman? And how fully did you plan the interaction between the two of you?

I chose a young actress named Miriam, whom I had met once before in connection with another film. Of course, I was also interested in the fact that she was an actress—when are we ever not acting?—and wanted to see if perhaps I could register that borderline transfiguration of "real" person into actor/actress and back again. I think that aspect of the film is successful and interesting still. So, Miriam came for her screen test, and we talked and performed and acted while the half-hour of film ran through the camera. It left us both bewildered and exhausted, questions hanging in the air.

These days especially, the film raises issues with regard to the camera as an instrument of the "male gaze." In fact, it seems a particularly vivid instance of the use of the camera to exert power over a female subject.

The camera is an instrument of the "gaze" of the person controlling it, male or female. Your question suggests that the male gaze is inherently exploitative and manipulative, while the female gaze is somehow, by definition, pure and free of such faults. I doubt if that would ever stand up to analysis. Any filming or photographing of anyone or anything, by a man or woman, is an attempt to exert power and to gain control.

The natural act of looking and seeing is an as-

sertion of power and the desire for control. That is why we see in the first place, why we have eyes. It didn't happen by accident. Power and force in their many disguises rule this world absolutely. It is not a charm school. All human motivation and behavior is about power and control. This is not necessarily bad or undesirable. Every living thing has its own version of what is and what should be, and all of these versions are usually in conflict. The stronger ones survive and prevail. It's not difficult to imagine a better world than this one, but that does seem to be what obtains here, at this time.

Filming by its nature is voyeuristic—so is natural looking and seeing—both unavoidably involve a privileged spectator observing an "other." There's no way around this. You are no less voyeuristic looking out from inside the camera obscura of your own skull than you are peeping through a viewfinder or keyhole or watching a film or any other visual spectacle. Any seeing of another person, or seeing of anything, automatically makes that person or thing "exotic" simply because they are "other"—not "you." The entire world and everything in it is "exotic," except for "you."

The Lighted Field

Much was made of the moment when she comes forward to touch the lens of the camera, but no one has ever noted that it was one of the very first instances in experimental, avant-garde films, of the self-reflection that became so prevalent in the 1970s.

Say Nothing *is your only sound film so far as I know.*

No, *Change of Heart* was a sound film and all of the early one-take films I mentioned were sound on film. Also, I'm working on one right now.

I'm interested in how the mind manufactures pictures in response to sound, how it converts sound into imaginary light, so to speak, imaginary images. What exactly are these images, what are they made of, how are they made, where do they come from?

A curious thing is that I always have a strong sense of a "projected" image, and of a "spectator." So where, exactly, is this image being projected, who is the spectator, who is the projectionist, and where and what is the screen? Of course, the mind does this all the time, even without sound stimulus, as in memory and in dream images. And, as every child knows, sit in the dark with your eyes closed and you will be presented with an automatic "movie" of considerable vividness and detail.

We don't really "see" anyway, so much as "imagine." Our sight is imaginary, as H. L. Gregory demonstrated some twenty years ago. Each eye is separately informed, and the information supplied to each eye is constantly being synthesized and interpreted and processed into imaginary constructs. This is the continuous natural movie of the world, which each of us is busily engaged in creating all the time, even in sleep.

The Wind Variations *was the first of your films I ever saw. I was at the Whitney Museum screening room, with a small audience from the Museum. Within a few minutes, there was an argument between those who were annoyed by the pace of the film and those who—whatever their reaction to the film—were annoyed by the arrogance of the others. There was almost a fight. Through all of this, I found the film long, but gorgeous, beautifully meditative. Do you remember early reactions to that film?*

I remember a fistfight. It was at the Modern [Museum of Modern Art], where the audience was sometimes unruly. Someone was talking during the film, and the person in front of him stood up and hit him. Somehow, several other people got involved, and it turned into quite a brawl, a hot-blooded, two-fisted dukeroo in defense of meditative silence and beauty.

This is also the earliest film in which your fascination with light—I'm tempted to say your fetishization of light—is evident. At what point did light become the focus of your filmmaking?

Around the time of *Huge Pupils*, I suppose, although it's very hard to say. I don't care for "fetishization"; it suggests irrational obsession, and that is inaccurate. I've described my feelings about light earlier. There is nothing mystical or arcane or irrational about it. We are made of the sun. That's where we came from. Anything less than a consuming interest in light seems strange to me.

I was very amused recently when I came across a line of John Milton's in which he defines light as "darkness made visible." Not surprising from a blind man, but what a wiseguy!

Like The Wind Variations, Huge Pupils *seems an experiment in broadening your dexterity with the camera. What led you to the diary form?*

I never thought of it as "diary"; in fact, I doubt if I was consciously thinking in terms of any particular form at all. Jonas Mekas described it as such after the fact, I think because he *was* consciously working that form and saw some affinities, but that concept was never useful to me. I think what was really at work was my old fascination with "news," in this case news of what I took to be heaven. The style and stance are there, hand-held and eye-level, steadfast and innocent of artifice and mortality—innocent, period. Trying to "record" that light storm of ghostly beauty blowing around me, doomed in the attempt, as we always are. And ghosts they were and are: the people by now aged to unrecognizability, the animals dust long since, the rooms themselves demolished; the only remaining trace is a length of decaying plastic with a few inaccurate shadows, rapidly fading. But I was sincere.

The shooting was improvisatory in the extreme. It was very important to me to be able to respond immediately and completely to whatever moved me at a given moment, with a minimum of art thought. It was the Code of the West . . . shoot first and ask questions later. I never used a light meter or tripod. My fond wish at the time was for a cinema of pure telepathy . . . transmission of visual energy direct from mind to mind, no fooling around with machinery. Everything was done in-camera at the moment of filming, complete trust of intuition, "first thought, best thought," thinking that being "right-minded" in the given moment would assure a successful outcome.

When was the title changed from Kodak Ghost Poems *to* Huge Pupils*? And why?*

The title was changed because I was threatened with a lawsuit by Eastman Kodak for copyright infringement over the use of the word "Kodak." I'm sure they would have won since they did invent that word. After that, the film was referred to as *The Ghost Poems* for awhile, until it became *Huge Pupils*, Part One of *The Adventures of the Exquisite Corpse*. This would have been 1974, I believe. There was some feeling that I should have resisted and gone to court over this, but of course, those who felt that way weren't about to pay the legal fees, and I wasn't about to be a martyr over it. I could hardly pay the rent at the time. Actually, the title worked better without "Kodak," anyway, because it reflected my feelings more exactly.

How did you decide on The Adventures of the Exquisite Corpse *as a title?*

I first used that title in 1972, and later Part II was shown at the Whitney under that title in 1974. As you know, it was the name of a parlor game popular among the surrealists in the 1920s, although it has a long occult history as a divinatory tool. The game takes a number of people to play. The trick is that a piece of clean paper is given to one person who draws a human head on the top, and then folds that over so that it can't be seen. The second participant then draws the neck and shoulders and folds that over and passes it to the third person, etc. At the end, the paper is unfolded and behold!—the exquisite corpse. Of course, any imagery can be substituted for the human body.

I was attracted to it as a title, first of all, because it's a perfect analogy for my own process of working: shooting "blind" without really consciously knowing why, or knowing how what I'm shooting connects with material already shot, or what I will shoot. Seeing the material assembled chronologically, I see many connections and couplings I might have been unaware of earlier, and by repeating this process, the shape of the finished film is finally "revealed."

When I first saw Huge Pupils, *I was jealous of the erotic pleasure you seemed to be having!*

Carnality was most important to me then, as it

is for all healthy and amorous young animals. And, of course, it is the most important part of the "trick" that life is: it's the lure, the bait. What animal can resist orgasmic pleasure? We don't learn until later that the other part of the trick is more sinister and ominous, at least as far as our cheerful and bright-eyed "personal identity" is concerned. If we could see the entire trick from beginning to end, we wouldn't play, would we? The bad news is revealed in stages, broken to us gently. The trick has fatal consequences.

I had moved from uptown bourgeois restriction and rectitude down to the Lower East Side and *la vie bohème*. Life more abundant! I imagined myself to be free, as we all do at that age. I lived with the Canadian actress Margaret LaMarre on Essex Street above Bernstein's Kosher Chinese Restaurant and made the film there. Big windows that got the morning sun. We were lovers in the way you cam be only when very young, and I wanted to celebrate this. So, very simply and in the most straightforward fashion I could manage, I made pictures of my strongest delights and joys, reveling in flesh and in light with great appetite, and in the ghost of flesh on film. No one really seemed to be dealing directly with erotic matters in film at that time. The general psychic climate was still very repressive and puritanical. Brakhage was working with sexual imagery, of course, and Carolee Schneemann, but they both seemed to be disguising the substance of it with "art."

I thought that perhaps more honesty and directness were possible, and I tried to work along those lines. Someoe once described the film as being in "beast language," which I took as a compliment, and still do. And, of course, the mythic "beauty and the beast" elements are now quite evident, although I wasn't conscious of that at the time. You might even say that the film is the beast's version of the story. You will find echoes of this near the end of *The Lighted Field*. It was made in a state of innocent wonder and even joy, much in the spirit of Blake's painting "Glad Day," the human beast in unashamed glory of body.

Looking back, I can see lots of influences, although I was unaware of them at the time. I discovered Courbet and Kodachrome II simultaneously. Courbet was very important to me. I still think highly of some of his work, but seeing "La Belle Irlandaise" and "Girl With a Parrot" for the first time really knocked me over. I also admired Bonnard and Stanley Spencer. I'd seen Spencer's various "Resurrections" at the Tate in 1964 or so and was very moved by them. I'm still in awe of them. Kodachrome II was wonderful; it was the only film stock ever made that could render flesh with any kind of accuracy. I'm told that Kodachrome I was even better, but that was before my time.

I remember that Christopher Smart was on my mind. I found out about him from Benjamin Britten's working of "Rejoice in the Lamb." And John Clare—I picked up a ragged old copy of his poems in a London bookstall for 50 cents. No one had ever heard of him over here. I admired them both for their incredible openness. Neither of them was a very good poet technically, and both were as mad as March hares, but they both got the full lethal high-voltage jolt of life straight, without protection or defense, the undiluted juice right from the source. And it killed them both, of course, but for their few luminous moments they got it right, as Blake did. Smart was incarcerated for stopping people on the street and asking them to join him in kneeling on the pavement to thank God for the miraculous beauties of the world.

Anyway, I was a kid, and aspired to such openness, and I had all the things I loved around me in those ghost rooms, now gone. Ghost-woman and ghost-light, and my familiars, ghost-dog and ghost-cat, beauteous apparancies, and I tried to catch them, with my little shadow catcher, to stop their vanishing, but they vanished anyway.

Charmed Particles

In terms of technique, you seem to be exploring new areas in these films. Was this your first use of single-framing?

I think so. After a period of very long takes, I got interested in the possibility of 24 different images in a projected second, working with the individual frame as the basic unit. There were a few people working in single frames then, but for the most part they all seemed to be trying to force techniques from other art forms onto film, which never seemed to work too well, i.e., each frame as a word or syllable, or each frame as a musical note or a brush stroke, trying for a synthesis that was never really possible. I was interested in using single-framing to convey kinetic energy. If it's done right, it can evoke states of high energy in the mind. Also, for me it's a much more accurate graphing of the flow of my own visual energy while shooting, more like a true picture of how I perceive. My seeing, at least while shooting, tends to operate in pulses and spurts of intensity, where thought and feeling and raw perceptual material coalesce and come into focus for distinct instants. Single-framing is very attractive for that reason. I've refined my use of that technique over the years, and I think it came to real fruition in *Charmed Particles* and *The Lighted Field*, and I'm working with it now in other ways.

The long, Lumière-like stare brings the mind to an attention of unnatural duration and intensity . . . an altered state, and that's the source of its power. With single-framing, the constant interruption of focused attention forces you to a kind of heightened perception because the mind is racing to absorb a great deal of information very quickly; the power here is constant surprise, which compels unusual alertness and the exhilaration that comes with that.

How widely was Huge Pupils *seen? Were there extreme reactions? Were screenings shut down?*

It was shown a great deal and was considered very scandalous, although that was never my intention. Things were still incredibly repressive then. People who didn't live through it can't really imagine how much so. *Naked Lunch* and Henry Miller's books were still going through the courts, and I routinely had material seized by the labs. I remember once going to pick up some material at a lab and being told by the manager that they had destroyed it. I was outraged, but curious too, and asked him what they had done with it. It turned out that they had dropped the rolls in boiling water!

I think it was 1967—I showed the film at Notre Dame, of all places, at a conference on eroticism in the arts. The administration told the students not to show the film, so of course they immediately set up a secret screening in an out-of-the-way classroom. At least three quarters of the student body showed up and tried to squeeze into the room. About five minutes into the film, the police broke the door open and tried to seize the print. Some students got hold of it first and took off, police in pursuit, waving night sticks and mace cans. Meanwhile the print had come loose and was unreeling all over the campus as they ran with it. Finally, the police cornered them. Wild punches, bloody heads, girls screaming, film flying—a living defense of the Constitution! The print was literally ripped to pieces—the body of Dionysus. That was an extreme case, but there were several other incidents in the heartland. In New York things were more civilized. A well-placed $20 bill assured your right to free expression.

Charmed Particles *puts the viewer—I assume by design—in an unusual situation: the film is full of visual pleasure. I'm "Oooohing" and "Wowing" all the time as I watch it. And yet, because of the way you use single-framing, there's battering of the eye that reminds me of Tony Conrad's* The Flicker. *It causes the viewer to continually fight exhaustion.*

By "viewer," you mean yourself in this case because not everyone has had that problem. The film presents an energy field of a particular intensity. It's possible to enter into it and be energized by it up to that intensity, if you want to. The pulsation of light and shadow, single framing plus 16–18 fps projection, exerts a hypnosis of a certain kind which tempts you to surrender conscious control of the proceedings. Loss of control is scary to that part of the mind responsible for it, so that part resists and fights to maintain control, and since the film is long, grows fatigued. But, of course, nothing bad will happen to you, in this case at least, if you lose control. The worst thing that can happen is that for an hour or so you'll see the way I see, rather than how you normally see. Also, since the energy level of that film is high, attempts to analyze it while it is in progress are frustrated, and that

can produce fatigue. Various people have told me that the film is "too short," "too long," and exactly the "right" length. Who am I to say?

I never consciously think of viewers' reactions. It's something you can never predict or anticipate, and I'm certainly not trying to manipulate reactions. What I'm interested in is strong and clear transmission of the energies at hand.

Charmed Particles *is, as I remember, a physics term, referring to particles of matter so small that they can be said to exist half way between matter and energy. I assume your use of the title here has to do with this film's hovering between being a record of the everyday, of what surrounds you in your daily life, and abstract, mysterious fields of visual energy. Often you begin with a recognizable scene, then "riff" into a wildly energetic set of abstractions. Is that the primary sense of the title for you?*

It is a physics term, and what attracted me to it as a title is that it describes the point at which energy becomes matter, intangible "nothing" becoming somehow "something." What lies at the heart of each atom is nothing, the beast at the heart of the labyrinth, and from that nothing, the great black hole, comes the something we call the world. Being emanates from nothing and vice versa.

Also, the film is particles being "charmed" into form, the grains conjured into images.

You seem less interested in overall conceptualization—either before you shoot, in the structuring of your films; or after you shoot, in terms of editing what you've captured/discovered—than in "being in the NOW," in "playing" the camera as a musician plays a musical instrument.

That's certainly true of *Charmed Particles*, which was totally improvised, starting with the very first image that appears in the finished film and continuing on from there. It was shot over a period of several years and the operating rule was that I would shoot every day, if at all possible and if the light was good, working with light and shadow and whatever was around me, not knowing in advance what I would be shooting, trusting that in the end, everything would cohere and come to meaning, which it did. Risé [Risé Hall-Noren] and I were living at that time in a tiny apartment on West Tenth Street, so small it was like living in a camera, although it got splendid light, and I took the basic elements of our life there and worked to see what

Charmed Particles

improvisation and variations were possible, to see if I could charm the disparate elements into form. Being able to invent and improvise and consciously shape material in a given moment has always been important to me, and I've always felt that, given good light, even the commonest, most mundane things are wonderfully rich in possibilities, if you have the eyes for it. It's the old story of working to reveal the "ordinary" as being extraordinary, which in fact it is.

I was very interested at the time in improvisational music of all kinds. Jazz, particularly Cecil Taylor and Charlie Parker, and Tibetan Buddhist music . . . thigh-bone trumpets and skull-drums . . . the Mazatec mushroom songs and Morrocan Sufi music. Also, animal songs: wolves, birds, crickets . . . this was a special interest, since music doesn't get more sincere than that, and animals are great improvisers.

How much preplanning do you do? How much editing do you do, once you've shot the material? And how often do you make imagery?

There is preplanning only in the sense that I'm always thinking about images, thinking with images, always wanting to make images. Always "working." By this time it's a natural function. I seldom look at anything without thinking of how it can be transformed into an "image." It's automatic, I'm not even conscious of doing it.

Preparation is mostly keeping the materials at hand and maintaining the correct frame of mind,

which makes working possible. A delicate balance between energy and circumstance. This is much harder to do than it sounds. But, of course, the basic, vital thing is good light where everything is revealed in its miraculousness. That is my passion. I love it physically, as I would a beautiful animal. October light is my favorite, and the raw spring light that always seems "new," somehow, but I take whatever I can get. I love it all, and I shoot whenever I can.

At its best, this is done in a special state of mind. It's not a trance state, and certainly not the taking of angelic dictation in the sense that Rilke meant it. I think of it as a state of "health," where thought and feeling are one and the same. The response to light—the process of seeing and feeling and thinking about it, and "capturing" it—is harmonious and simple and direct, without doubt or hesitation. In this condition I know exactly what to do and how to do it, no questions. This state sometimes lasts for a long time before diminishing. I'm superstitious about forcing it, so when I feel it start to lessen, I stop working.

In editing, I gather material shot over a period of time and assemble it more or less in the order in which it was shot, chronologically, and then I study it until I begin to see how things belong together, what connections to make. This is always difficult. In theory, there are thousands of possible combinations, but in theory only. There is only one "right" way for it to go. It's very much as though the film were already "made" in a part of my mind, and the working is simply letting it reveal itself. This is a very painstaking process. It's frustrating and extremely exhilarating at the same time, and it's very hard work.

When I showed The Lighted Field *at Utica College this past spring, Pat leaned over to me at one point and said, "He must love magic." It struck me as an astute comment; in a sense you're in the Méliès tradition, for you the camera is the magician's top hat.*

True in the sense that everything in that film was done in the camera at the moment of shooting. That's always been a point of pride with me, it's true of all my films. No optical printers or special processes. All invention in the moment of shooting itself. I stress this so that you'll fully appreciate my virtuosity . . . and my humility.

The Lighted Field is a magic trick, prestidigitatious resurrection of the dead, animation of the inert. That's the metaphorical nexus of the entire film. We all love magic, at least as children. That's basic good health.

The Lighted Field *has a very different mood from your earlier films. In fact, the clarity of its mood helped me see that, while many of your visual concerns may have remained consistent since* Huge Pupils *and* The Wind Variations, *each film feels the way it does because of your overall mental state during the period when you were shooting.* The Lighted Field *showed me that the films are more personally expressionistic than I had realized. Specifically,* The Lighted Field *seems a very happy film; you seem happy as a film-maker, as a family man, as husband and father; a certain psychological darkness seems to have lifted. I have a feeling that this is just the sort of thing you don't like to discuss, but is this how the film seems to you?*

Perhaps, although it's a little more complicated than that. But in general you're right, and you're right that I don't like to talk about it. I began the film just after my marriage to Risé, which was extreme good fortune for me, for many, many reasons. It was made in a period of intense hard work, apart from work on the film, in which we tried to make a home. I was able to re-prioritize things and to gather and focus my energies in a way I hadn't been able to before. It brought about a kind of very practical, utilitarian down-home "enlightenment." I don't really care to say more.

The Lighted Field *also refers directly to your work as an archivist and researcher in the found-footage passages. Could you talk a bit about your work as an archivist? What exactly do you do?*

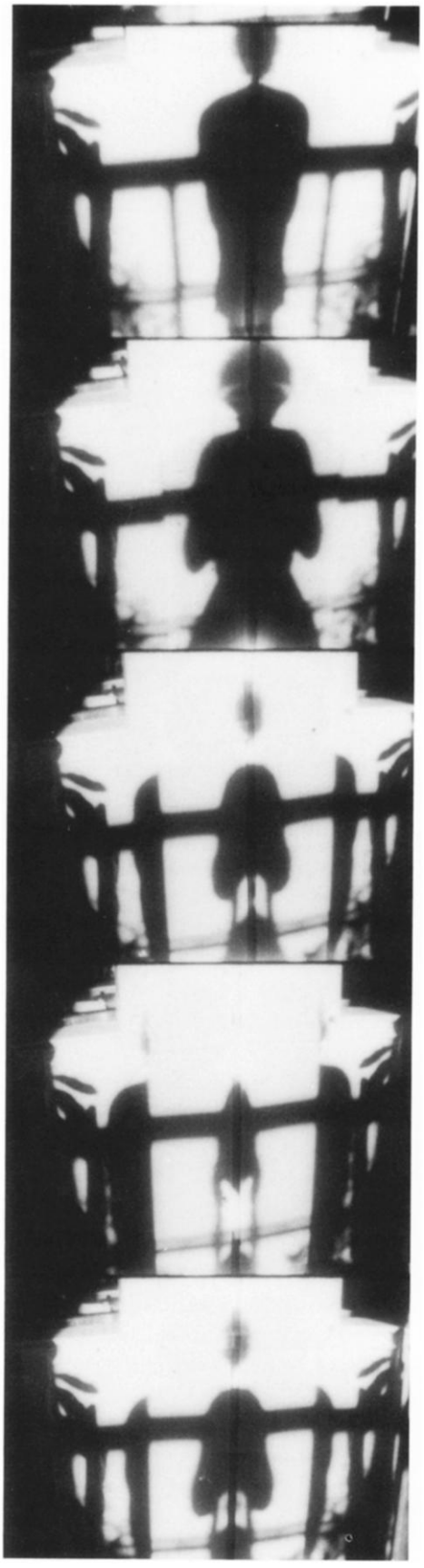
I work with news images on a daily basis, both modern material and material going back to the 1920s and earlier, and that's how I came upon those shots. They were all originally shot on nitrate film and were in the process of decay when I found them, quite literally turning to dust, as nitrate does, so it wasn't really a question of appropriation but of rescue. I saved what I could of them and transferred them to safety finegrain. I found them very resonant and beautiful in themselves, and so I employed them, as though they were actors under my direction, frequently portraying me or acting as stand-ins for me. In their original commercial usage

some fifty years ago, they were projected maybe twice at most. Some of them were never used at al and buried in the vaults and left to rot. So I was glad to be able to recirculate them, put them back into the light again.

I've worked as an archivist for a long time. My expertise is in knowledge of news, the ability to know about and locate very specific news images on request, very quickly and efficiently under intense pressure. And I'm extremely good at it. I also deal in the licensing of this material and in rights and clearances. I work on all kinds of projects: documentaries, features, television commercials, music videos, industrials, you name it. The stock in trade is war, murder, death, destruction, grief and weeping, disaster and degradation, greed, starvation, intense suffering, horrible human activities, crazed apes mad with blood lust! In short, news. Have you ever wondered why the news you get from TV and newspapers is all bad? Have I got news for you: there is no good news, none. The news *is* bad.

The particular found imagery you use in The Lighted Field—*the dogs diving into the water and later "undiving"; the man who is put into the block of ice at the beginning and removed at the end; the boy and dog in bed; the X-ray material; the imagery of the laser—seems to be used in a metaphoric way. The man going into and coming out of the block of ice is particularly suggestive, since it's a framing device for the film. I'm tempted to see it as a comment on your moving into and out of the film-making process; but I confess also to a more sentimental interpretation: that the warmth and happiness of* The Lighted Field *is a function of your coming out of a "colder" period as person/film-maker.*

My use of those found images was metaphorical. There's a metaphorical progression from the first image to the last. This is something I rarely permit myself, although you can say that any film image is a metaphor, just by its very nature. Whatever else it is, *The Lighted Field* is a narrative, a carefully constructed one, the telling of a tale. Of course, every film is a narrative, isn't it, whatever other pretensions it might have, simply by virtue of the fact that one frame must follow another in time. Our minds are such that we are obliged to make a story out of everything we experience,



Sequential frames from *The Lighted Field,* by Andrew Noren

obliged to frame things to make them comprehensible. We are constantly telling ourselves stories that allegedly interpret the play of light and shadow on the retina screen, and the play of imaginary light on the screen of the "mind," or "the lighted field," if you will. I think we probably became conscious in the first place by struggling to tell ourselves stories, to make meaning of the chaos of sensory input that afflicts us. "Story" is the absolute basic essential of thinking. Our minds consist of a "teller" and a "listener." Consciousness is the mind communicating with itself about itself, telling itself the story of itself, story of past, future, now. We have to have "story" to survive, and our "story" or consciousness is dream by definition. We live in a dream of waking, we dream that we're "awake," imagining past and future, telling ourselves elaborate stories about both. We flatter ourselves that we recognize a delusional present moment, not past or future but the reality of "now." But of course we no sooner apprehend this present moment than it is past. (I read somewhere that the average person thinks that the "present" lasts for about three seconds.)

We invented cinema deliberately as a device to allow us to dream while waking, and to give us access to areas of the mind that were previously only available in sleep. It was no accident that the first film-makers immediately seized on dream device and method as the first, essential film "language," as though the cinema was specifically invented for the objectification and articulation of those things, and for waking access to the dream-state.

Anyway in *The Lighted Field* "dream of story" and "story of dream" are closely interwoven as themes. It is also a ghost story in a sense. It was calculated in a way to be a posthumous work, a tale told from the grave, and of course, in time it will become exactly that. That's another narrative element in the film, an elaborate *memento mori*. This isn't unduly morbid. The best possible mental state to be in is one in which you are clearly conscious of your personal mortality. Clear and constant recognition of this will energize you in a way that nothing else can. At the very least, it keeps you alert. A friend of mine once calculated that since the speed of the revolution of the earth around its own axis is some 877 miles per hour, that is the exact speed at which your grave approaches.

Could you talk a bit about what you had in mind for the film's overall structure. It does seem to have been more fully arranged than some earlier films.

It is carefully constructed and works on many levels simultaneously. There's a straightforward "documentary" level on which it's "about" being at home, going to work, and being at home again. That is the basic rhythm of my life, after all, so that's the "ground." I described it best in the original program notes: "the Ghost in love, at work, at play with bright companions in the Lighted Field." It's a tale of a dreamer, who dreams what you, viewer and also dreamer, "see," and *is* what he sees and what you see. It's a film about dreaming and is literally, physically a dream. This is a dream of sleep and waking, death and resurrection, which is the central theme of the film, and is of course, the central theme of anyone's life, manifest on a daily basis, the "dream-film" of consciousness, of which we are solitary spectators in the theaters of our own skulls.

In general, *The Adventures of the Exquisite Corpse* is a reworking of what has to be the world's oldest story, "the fool's progress," how the fool became wise. There are hundreds of versions and variations, but the story is always essentially the same: the young fool leaves home to set off down the road of the world, hoping to find the great treasure that is hidden behind the veil of the world's illusions, behind the screen of the movie of the world, as it were. After many dangers and hardships, and by the exercise of strength and cunning, the fool tears away the veil and discovers that what is behind it is "nothing." This is valuable knowledge: it *is* the treasure, the "Pearl of Great Price," and in recognizing this, the fool becomes wise, a wise fool, and can see the world for what it is. That is the larger framework of *The Adventures of the Exquisite Corpse*: the individual parts function as lesser wheels that move within the larger wheel of the whole.

How much avant-garde film do you see? Are there particular film-makers you make a point of keeping up with?

In theory I'm interested in almost everyone. I simply don't have enough time to see nearly as much as I would like to. A lot of what I do see is discouraging because it's silly.

There's a fashion right now for work that is allegedly "transgressive," which is supposed to be liberating, but it's really middle-class adolescent petulance, art as an arena for revenge against parents. This is okay in kindergarten, but doesn't do much good elsewhere. A lot of work I see seems to revel in pathology, which isn't especially useful either. Monumentalizing alienation and personal misery and grievance is a waste of everyone's time. There's also a lot of "clever" work from victims of art schools, which is depressing indeed. I do see good things from time to time, but as I've said, getting to see them more than once is a major effort.

The absolute best thing I've seen recently and certainly the most avant-garde was a lightning storm over southern New Jersey. It was so spectacular and sophisticated and surely one of the all-time great movies. It was incredibly powerful and intricate and intelligent and terrifying. It blasted us awake at 2 A.M., and we watched it through the black frame of the back door: vivid, intense, electric presentation of every last single detail of each bush, tree, leaf of grass. Vibrating out of absolute blackness in blinding, blue-white light, figure and ground switching places several times a second. Violent dimensional collisions, macroscopic magnification of the smallest things. Then everything vanishing into blackness so intense that the afterimages were almost as strong as the original. And sound! Earth-shattering contrapuntal booms and blasts of such power I was sure the house would be blown away. I wish I could begin to describe it. It was wonderful, and as avant-garde as it gets. We were enchanted.

Reviews

GoodFellas

Director: Martin Scorsese. Script: Nicholas Pileggi and Scorsese. Photography: Michael Ballhaus. Editor: Thelma Schoonmaker. Warners.

GoodFellas is arguably the apex of Scorsese's most openly ethnic production. Wishing to make a "good commercial picture," Scorsese returned to the Italian/American setting which had already inspired his best films (except *Taxi Driver*).[1] Scorsese's first feature, *Who's That Knocking At My Door?* (1969), portrayed and examined sexism and masculinity in the character of J. R. (Harvey Keitel), a young Italian/American in crisis over his Catholic faith. This promising debut revealed Scorsese's inspirational sources (the American cinema of Ford and Hawks, and the French New Wave) and it also contained the seeds of a cinematic style capable of both accepting and bending narrative conventions. Scorsese again returned to ethic concerns with *Mean Streets* (1973), a film which artfully blended documentary reality with subjective fiction in the portrayal of four young men on the fringes of society in New York's Little Italy. In 1975, Scorsese turned to documentary with *Italianamerican*, in which he interviewed his own family. *Italianamerican* also confirmed Scorsese's tendency to use his personal environment for his cinema. This tendency to personalize the set and make it into a family emerges clearly in his long-standing collaboration with such actors as Robert De Niro and Harvey Keitel.[2] In 1980, Scorsese and De Niro returned to the Italian/American milieu with the highly acclaimed *Raging Bull*, a film in which violence and masculinity are at once celebrated and ruthlessly exposed.[3]

Even at a cursory glance Scorsese's ethnic films appear to share a common attitude, an intensely contradictory ambivalence. It is a love/hate relationship which is best summarized in the song at the end of *GoodFellas*, Sid Vicious's version of Sinatra's *My Way*. Scorsese is drawn to tradition but he also questions it with the brutal aplomb of a punk. This transgressive celebration results in cog-

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nitive fury. Italian/American culture is the reality of his personal as well as cinematic formative years, and it remains the reality he can best recreate viscerally. It is no accident that the most blatantly documentary qualities of his films (voice-overs, intertitles, Super-8 snippets inserted in the narrative) all appear in his ethnic films. In fact, it is mainly to re-create the truth of ethnic situations and concerns that Scorsese has perfected his own brand of expressionistic realism. *GoodFellas* contributes to, enhances, and explains that realism.

The mob film, a subcategory of the gangster film, is currently enjoying a popular revival (e.g., Coppola's *Godfather III* and the Coen brothers' *Miller's Crossing*). As well as being a smart commercial move, Scorsese's choice of material allowed him to test the possibility of introducing some realism into a fictional genre which, vacillating between the epic grandeur of *The Godfathers* and the epic idiocy of De Palma's *Wise Guys*, had known little of it.[4]

Before *GoodFellas*, Scorsese had never tackled the Mob directly, but rather portrayed its impact on the lives and imagination of his ethnic group. The mob had been a menacing horizon, a limit which forced the characters to some kind of adjustment. In *Who's That Knocking at My Door?*, J. R. enjoys playing with a gun at an all-male party in a drunken mockery of the hitman's bravado. In *Mean Streets*, Charlie at once resents and exploits his connections with the mob: an emblem of Scorsesian contradictory characters, he seeks independence but pursues it in a self-defeating way through his connection with a Mafia uncle. And Jake La Motta's boxing career is defined by the mob, which he resists while becoming its metaphor: Jake becomes one of the stars in the American firmament produced by the desperate violence of the Italian/Americans. In 1985, Scorsese discovered the right material for a film on the mob: an ex-wiseguy's memories as told to and retold by Nick Pileggi, a New York journalist and Mafia expert.

Pileggi's *Wise Guy* (1985) chronicles the life of Henry Hill, half-Irish and half-Sicilian, who became a wiseguy thanks to his "bid for gangsterdom" and an adolescence fortuitously spent under the wind of the Mafia boss Paul Vario (Paulie Cicero in the film, played by Paul Sorvino). With the exception of four years of "golden" imprisonment in a state penitentiary (1970–74), the period 1963–80 brought nothing but splendor and excitement to Henry (Ray Liotta): he was protected and respected; made money by the bundles and counted it by the wad; married Karen (played by Lorraine Bracco, Harvey Keitel's wife) and kept an official lover; had two children and a place in the large Vario family. In the company of Jimmy Burke (Jimmy Conway in the film, played by Robert De Niro), Henry accomplished the biggest heist in the history of American crime: six million dollars in cash and jewels stolen from a Lufthansa cargo. Later, however, when he was arrested for dealing drugs, Henry lost Vario's backing and realized that he was as good as dead. He thus enrolled in the Federal Witness Protection Program and became an instrument to the conviction of Paul Vario and Jimmy Burke.

Indeed, the book had all the elements which engaged Scorsese's personal mythology—a man who struggled to emerge and ended up in loneliness—and fulfilled his desire for a view of the mob from below. Significantly, Pileggi's book does not portray a godfather nor an untouchable but a wiseguy. Although associated with the Mafia, the wiseguy is not the type that sits at home pulling the strings: wiseguys rob, extort, kill if necessary, break all sorts of rules on their way to success. And they risk their lives in the mean streets where, as Charlie Civello said in the film's first shot, "you make up for your sins" (rather than in church).

> By birth, certainly, they were not prepared in any way to achieve their desires. They were not the smartest kids in the neighborhood. They were not born the richest. They weren't even the toughest. In fact, they lacked almost all the necessary talents that might have helped them satisfy the appetites of their dreams, except one—their talent for violence.[5]

The wiseguys are the picaresque element in the mob, that unpredictable element which constantly threatens its order.

Wise Guy offered a view of the mob that pulsated with the feeling of unembellished truth. Scorsese reports "really enjoying it [Pileggi's book] because of the free-flowing style" and thinking that "it would make a fascinating film if you just make it what it is—literally as close to the truth as a fiction film, a dramatization, could get."[6] For him and for the millions of readers who established the

Ray Liotta as Henry and Lorraine Bracco as Karen in *GoodFellas*

book as a best seller it is the "feeling of truth" which permeates this kind of book that actually counts. Hairsplitting theorists know that there is no such thing as the Truth. In the case of *Wise Guy*, however, the "feeling of truth" is obviously heightened by the objective conditions of the book's origin: a real person in hiding. If realism is the uncovering of what lies hidden, then Pileggi's book stages the realist assumption in its very making.

The adaptation of the book is extremely faithful, and if the book is a piece of documentary journalism, *GoodFellas* is a piece of documentary film fiction, a docudrama of sorts. It provides on-screen factual information (dates and places; what happened to the characters in real life) as well as historical allusions making the viewer feel that, by the end of the film, s/he has gained knowledge about the world depicted. Henry's voice-over provides contextual and narrative connections for us, so that most scenes require no beginning and no ending but merely a few illustrative, emblematic shots. This documentary adherence to the facts is at once complemented and countered by Scorsese's ebullient style. At first his restless camera and jump-cuts seem to recreate the improvisational style typical of documentaries. On a couple of occasions, Scorsese even utilizes the nonfictional device of having characters address the camera—a long tracking shot in a dimly lit bar room, with Henry's voice identifying the wiseguys who say hello to the camera. As the film proceeds, however, the camerawork increasingly defeats the supposed objectivity of a documentary style. The close-ups of such details as food and shoes, the freeze-frames, the rhythmic editing are constant reminders of authorial expression. However short the shots, the camera is incessantly zooming or tracking, signaling a strong subjectivity behind the lens. The seamless, smooth editing does not efface the director's production of meaning. On the contrary, one is always aware of Scorsese behind the camera.

Scorsese's camerawork ends up giving an expressionist touch to his realistic portrayal of the wiseguys, the kind of expressionist touch which he emphasizes through his use of the sound track. Joseph Mankiewicz once remarked that he wrote his scripts "essentially for audiences who come to listen to a film as well as to look at it."[7] The same thing could be said for Scorsese and his memorable use of music. Scorsese's recognition of the importance of music has led him to anticipate the visceral pleasure of music videos in his own films. Scorsese

is among other things a director of aural pleasure in narrative cinema, and his talent for image/sound montage should be proverbial. For example, *Who's That Knocking at My Door?* introduces J. R.'s oneiric fantasy of sexual guilt by attaching the initial notes of the Doors' *The End* onto the high-contrast close-up of Harvey Keitel in bed. It was a stunningly beautiful audio-visual composition which Coppola, in a moment of Italian/American intertextuality, quoted for the equally stunning beginning of *Apocalypse Now*. Camerawork *and* music make the red-glowing, bar room scenes in *Mean Streets* or the initial fast-tracking shot of *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* fragments of unforgettable cinema for anybody who enjoys music as a sound track to one's own life.

GoodFellas is truly magisterial in this respect, in part because Scorsese now has the means to buy the rights to songs deeply carved in our collective Imaginary. Nobody knowing the pop-sociological value of Eric Clapton's *Layla* can remain indifferent at Scorsese's use of the song's piano exit in the last portion of his film. We first see a group of street children interrupting their ball game and stare at something we do not see. We then cut—and the haunting piano starts—to what they see, a slow, high-angle tracking shot over the pink Cadillac with a dressed-up couple in *rigor mortis* and dry blood. Cut to Frenchy's body rolling in the garbage truck's compactor and then to another slow track in the refrigerator truck, at the end of which we see Frankie Carbone's frozen body: a hyperrealist nightmare. *Layla* is an emblem-song of a period forever gone, a period for which Scorsese has occasional spurts of nostalgia. His use of this song over the dead bodies of Jimmy's once-partners enriches the factual information (Jimmy is whacking these people) with expressionistic overtones (Scorsese sees the song as the best accompaniment for images of ungrateful death).

Scorsese then uses camerawork and music to impose his own subjectivity onto the story. The third means adopted in *GoodFellas* to alter Pileggi's book to Scorsese's expressive needs is to be found in the small but significant variations from the text. Scorsese's film blows up and virtually creates the character of Tommy De Simone (Tommy De Vito in the film, played by Joe Pesci) who is not well developed in Pileggi's text. The book hints at Tommy's psychopathic violence but in no way alludes to his social or private life. In *GoodFellas* not only does Tommy (rather than Jimmy) dominate the group scenes, but he endows the film with its dramatically effective mixture of registers: comic and scary, pleasurable and repulsive. *GoodFellas*'s comic side allows the audience to let their guard down and thus sets them up to be all the more affected by the film's brutal scenes.

Conversely, *GoodFellas*'s violent side gives the film an edge that it otherwise would not have and leaves the audience unresolved as to whether it should be having a good time. This dual effect, which redeems the film by keeping it from being a bit too safe, is mostly accomplished through Tommy. For instance, the sequence at the beginning of Henry's adult life is wonderfully emblematic of Tommy's function in the film. He is recounting one of his colorful tales to a bunch of wiseguys in a crowded restaurant. No sooner does Henry compliment Tommy, "You're funny," than Tommy's jovial expression vanishes. "What do you mean I'm funny?" The tension rises as Henry stutters, trying to extricate himself from Tommy's unfolding anger. "What's so fucking funny about me?" insists Tommy. The narration threatens to move from laughter to violence, from pleasure to pain. At the peak of the suspense, however, Henry realizes that Tommy was putting him on. "Almost had you there!" says Tommy. The laughter resumes, Henry is one of the guys—and the violence is deflected outward, onto the restaurant's owner. Tommy's presence is a guarantee of pleasure and yet constantly threatens the film with going out of control. The already disturbing effect of combining violence and laughter in the same film is thus magnified. We resent laughing at a character who is also so unequivocally despicable. Can pleasure be so amoral?

To enhance the complexity of Tommy's character, Scorsese gives him a mother, played by no less than his own mother Catherine. This may suggest the film-maker's identification with Tommy, a character who is the locus of a dangerously unpredictable ambivalence. Indeed, most of Scorsese's films have some character with Tommy's unresolvable edge. Moreover, in stressing the mother-son relationship so strongly, Scorsese makes the point that retarded childhood is after all the problem with the tough games played by the wiseguys. Men just do not grow up, and *GoodFellas* shows the gang-

sters as kids; but it also casts the spectators into the role of kids, forcing them to feel the contradictory pleasure of liking the bad guys.

Pileggi's book ended with an image of a happy and successful Henry, thus providing an implicit moral closure to the story: "Thanks to the government for which he works, Henry Hill has turned out to be the ultimate wiseguy." (289) The film's ending, however, gives quite a different feeling. We first see Henry get up from the witness stand in the tribunal and walk towards a retreating camera, all the while looking at and talking to it. His words recollect how good his life as a gangster was. We then cut to a developing suburban residential area. The camera starts a lateral track on a row of houses and stops on Henry picking up the paper from his porch, while his voice-over says that now he has to resign himself to living "like every shmuck." There is no sign of moral growth. The story has not produced an awakening in the character, but only unashamed nostalgia for a child's fantasy. As if this were not enough, Henry's final look into the camera does not even provide a narrative closure, for it is rapidly followed by an unexpected medium close-up of Tommy (who had already died in the film) unloading his gun at the audience. He wears an old hat and is grinning, while the sound track starts Sid Vicious's *My Way*. It is a funny (what do you mean funny?) shot for an ending, something like an ending for children's comics. It is as if the text itself were now saying to the audience: "Do not forget how much fun all this was."

Scorsese does not judge his characters in the way Pileggi surreptitiously does. Scorsese's operation on the book is nicely encapsulated by the initial sequence, whose importance is magnified by its position in the middle of the credits and by the fact that it will be repeated later in the film. Henry is at the wheel of his Pontiac, with Jimmy dozing next to him and Tommy in the back. Strange thumping sounds catch their attention. They pull over, walk to the back of the car and stare at the trunk. Backlit by a red glow, the three men hesitate and then open the trunk, exposing the sight of a man's body wrapped in bloodsoaked tablecloths. Quite graphically, Tommy stabs his butcher knife into the body several times and Jimmy unloads his gun on it to make sure it is really dead. Scorsese then cuts to Henry closing the trunk and zooms in on his perplexed face; freeze. Henry's voice-over says, "As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster." In the book, Henry actually says something quite similar—"at the age of twelve my ambition was to be a gangster" (13)—but he does so in a paragraph which depicts the glamor of the gangster lifestyle and which thus justifies Henry's wish. Scorsese took Henry's retrospective remark and attached it to a scene of something happening much later in the book (the murder of Billy Batts). As a result, in the film Henry's words are contradicted by the image. In fact, they make no sense unless we turn to a rhetorical figure which is entirely absent from the book: irony.

Scorsese attempts to unmask the myth of the Mafia by means of visual irony, by staging a self-conscious observer in the person of Henry who, thanks to Ray Liotta's performance, turns out to be a somewhat passive protagonist, detached from the events although implicated in them. The first shot *after* the credits is a close-up of 12-year-old Henry's eyes looking at Paulie's cabstand through the windowpanes of his bedroom. In a sense, *GoodFellas* can be seen as the daydream of a male child who wants what the most successful members in his community have. Eventually, the film will show that the things Henry covets are nothing but the things which most men are after, power and money. Not everyone has the guts nor the opportunity to be a gangster, but the myth of success is the very stuff of the American Dream.[8] Believers in the dream cannot criticize the wise guy for what he does, because after all he is just refusing to play straight in a game which is certainly not known for its fairness.

Hence, *GoodFellas* is characterized by a particular type of irony which leads to honest acceptance rather than critical judgment, conscious involvement rather than mere disdain. Perhaps, such an irony is best described as realistic self-awareness. Scorsese sees through the myth of the wiseguy and denounces its fixation in childhood; at the same time he knows that he too likes the same things as the wiseguys; success and stardom attract everybody. In a sense, then, Scorsese exposes himself together with the wiseguys, revealing the common element which moralists prefer to overlook.

The same holds true for Scorsese's portrayal of masculinity. As an Italian man watching *GoodFellas*, I felt constantly implicated in what the film was exposing, an all-male world, where the boys do

the talking and set the rules. *GoodFellas* touches a raw nerve in the male Imaginary by making us feel the intense power and the "wonderful arrogance" of the wiseguys.[9]

On the subject of irony and masculinity, Scorsese must be credited with an interesting move. At the time when Henry starts dating Karen—roughly half an hour into the film—*GoodFellas* surprises us by inserting *her* voice-over.[10] She thus challenges Henry's authority as the first-person narrator and provides an alternative point of view. She sees Henry and the Italian/American milieu with the eye of an outsider (she comes from a respectable Jewish family). There is even a point at which the narrative is totally hers, during the wedding scene. It is fascinating to speculate on how the film might have been reshaped if Scorsese had gone further with the dual voice-over. Instead, *GoodFellas* bears witness to an old-fashioned, ethnic mode of masculinity.

Is *GoodFellas* just a virtuoso piece with no substance? Is Scorsese indulging in a trip of macho *bella figura*? In effect, the film's formal extravagance often parallels and enhances the content. For example, to impress Karen on his first date Henry takes her to the Copacabana. They leave the car key to a valet and enter through the back door, thus avoiding the line at the entrance. The camera follows them through a maze of steaming stoves, into the crowded club where two waiters promptly place a table for them where no one had been allowed before, front and center. It is undoubtedly a virtuoso piece, one of the most tortuous tracking shots in the history of cinema. Yet, it has a formal justification, suggesting the drive towards the center which motivates the search for success. The pleasure of occupying a central position and of being looked at finds here a spatial and visual translation.

GoodFellas is yet another proof of how Scorsese works within a realist tradition which he modifies significantly, thus enabling it to withstand the recent attacks on representation.[11] It is as if Scorsese knew that reality is never objective because there is always a subject experiencing it. Experience, moreover, is never a passive reception of stimuli but an activity—an activity that Scorsese mirrors in his films. He is adamant about making us see what he sees. There is no Bazinian freedom for the viewer of his films. Spectators cannot sit back and choose from the reality that Scorsese puts on the screen. Scorsese's stylistic ebullience is the mark of an extreme subjectivity which could not be further removed from the objective rendering of reality associated with realism. While offering us his obsessions, however, Scorsese's ethnic films do give us a strong sense of reality; we are certainly more likely to say "this is how it must be" with *GoodFellas* than with any other mob film. This is partly due to Scorsese's adoption of cinematic conventions associated with realism (repulsive material, factual information and seemingly unstructured narrative). But there is something more, something which is hard to define and which I tend to associate with the intensity of expression.

It comes as no surprise that the best term to describe the dominant stylistic feature of *GoodFellas* was coined by Pier Paolo Pasolini, the Italian director who most reworked the neorealist tradition. In his article "The Cinema of Poetry," Pasolini theorized the free indirect POV, a type of shot which is both subjective (what and how a character sees) and objective (the look at the camera).[12] According to Pasolini, this Janus-like perspective allows the director to express his vision through the pretext of the character's vision. *GoodFellas* abounds with shots which bears witness to both the point of view of the characters and that of the director. In fact, most of Scorsese's films make extensive use of this shot. As Robert Kolker observed, "Scorsese's films create a tension between two opposing cinematic forms: the documentary and the fictional. The documentary aspect offers the possibility of a seemingly objective observation of characters, places and events; the other demands a subjectivity of point of view which in Scorsese's work is so severe that the world becomes expressionistic."[13] This dialectic between the objective and subjective results in his frequent use of the free indirect POV, the stylistic hallmark of a self-conscious realism.

GoodFellas calls attention to several strong parallels between Scorsese and Pasolini. Both filmmakers use violence and social pathology as a way to redeem their vision and their films. Both are firmly rooted within the Catholic religion and yet against its institutionality, so much so that both felt the need to make a film on Christ.[14] They both are entrenched in an all-male world, where homosocial desire may or may not erupt into openly homosexual (sub)texts.[15] Both directors personalize their film-making via life-long collaborations

with selected actors (Davoli/Citti and De Niro/Keitel). Both are fond of using their mothers in their films. And both are interested in the portrayal of marginality and deviance. But the thing that most justifies a comparison between Scorsese and Pasolini is their innovative, self-conscious work within the realist canon in an age when film theory has labelled any realist pursuit naive and all reality a simulacrum. In an interview on *GoodFellas*, Scorsese remarked:

> I find that documentaries are so moving, especially if it is the old *cinéma-vérité* style. It is something about the way people are captured. The sense of truth is what gets me. And I always regret that we can never get as close as that when we're working with actors. You re-create those moments and sometimes you do get that certain reality.[16]

Asked to define his relationship with neorealism, Pasolini once answered in similar terms by saying that compared with the cinema of De Sica and Rossellini, his own films had introduced "a certain realism."[17] Both directors had recourse to the word "certain" to indicate that, however ultimately undefinable, realism and reality are useful words, as statements of intent and practical signals. There may be no objective reality (nor realism), but reality can nonetheless be represented (and realism achieved) subjectively, precariously, in a certain way, "my way."

Notes

1. After the stress of *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), Scorsese declared (*American Film*, March 1989, pp. 46–51) that he wanted "to make some good commercial pictures" before getting involved in anything serious. In the same interview, however, talking about *GoodFellas*, he said: "I hope it will infuriate the audience." This apparent contradiction between being "commercial" and "infuriating" explains much of his cinema, his talent for working in the mainstream and yet maintaining a certain edge. *GoodFellas* won both commercial and critical success. Useful reviews/interviews on *GoodFellas* are: Amy Taubin, "Martin Pileggi's Cinema of Obsessions," *Village Voice*, September 19, 1990, pp. 37–9; Kathleen Murphy, "Made Men," *Film Comment*, September–October 1990, pp. 25–27, followed by an interview with Scorsese by Gavin Smith, pp. 27–31; Thierry Jousse, "L'affaire Judas," *Cahiers du Cinéma*, September 1990, n. 435, October 1990, pp. 18–19; and Peter Keough, "Street Smarts," *The Boston Phoenix*, September 21, 1990, p. 6. All of these reviews agree on Scorsese's "return to greatness." To the best of my knowledge, the only review which disagrees with the above and actually argues the opposite is Pauline Kael, "Tumescence as Style," *New Yorker*, Sept. 24, 1990, pp. 98–101.

   I am using Italian/American instead of Italian-American as a sign of support of Tamburri's suggestion that the hyphen "initially represented the dominant group's reluctance to accept the newcomer" and is a graphic translation of the distance at which ethnic groups should be kept. "The slash instead of the hyphen involves not removing but, more precisely turning it on its side by forty-five" in order to actually bridge the gap between the two terms. See Anthony Tamburri, "To Hyphenate or not to Hyphenate," *Italian Journal*, vol. III, n. 5, 1990, pp. 37–42. (An extended version is forthcoming in *Critical Inquiry*.)
2. For a good discussion of Scorsese's "personalism" as ethnic trait, see Lee Lourdeaux, *Italian and Irish Filmmakers in America*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), pp. 218–262.
3. Although during the eighties Scorsese seemed not to be directly interested in ethnicity, it must be remembered that Tom Cruise in *The Color of Money* bears an Italian/American name, Vincent Lauria. And Scorsese's own coming to terms with his deviant Catholicism through *The Last Temptation of Christ* was certainly inscribed within his ethnic legacy.
4. A list of mob films made by Italian/American directors would include, (in addition to *GoodFellas*) *The Godfather* and *Wise Guys*, De Palma's *The Untouchables* (1987) and, in a sense, Cimino's *The Year of the Dragon*, which depicts the Chinese Mafia (1985).
5. Nicholas Pileggi, *Wise Guy*, (New York: Pocket Books, 1985), p. 37, hereafter cited in the text.
6. *Film Comment*, op. cit. p. 27.
7. Derek Conrad, "Putting on the Style," *Films and Filming* 6, n. 4, p. 9.
8. Talking about *Mean Streets* in David Thompson and Ian Christie (eds), *Scorsese on Scorsese* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989), Scorsese said that his film "dealt with the American Dream, according to which everybody thinks they can get rich quick, and if they can't do it by legal means then they'll do it by illegal ones" (p. 47).
9. The expression "wonderful arrogance," referring to Henry Hill's memoirs, is Scorsese's. See *Film Comment*, op. cit.
10. Karen speaks in the book as well, as does Linda, Henry's first official lover. Hearing her voice in the film, however, seems more unusual. The use of multiple intradiegetic narrators (e.g., Mankiewicz's *All About Eve*, 1950) is not very common in the history of narrative cinema and to the best of my knowledge only Truffaut's *L'Homme qui aimait les femmes* (The Man Who Loved Women, 1977) uses a female and a male voice as narrators with a slight hint of gender opposition.
11. In the introduction to *Scorsese on Scorsese*, the editors argue that "Scorsese's is a thoroughly modern conception of 'realism', one that combines total authenticity *and* expressivity." (p. xxvii)
12. Pier Paolo Pasolini, "The Cinema of Poetry," *Heretical Empiricism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), pp. 167–185.
13. R. P. Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 210.

14. Unsurprisingly, Scorsese has a great appreciation for Pasolini's *The Gospel According to Matthew*, on which he made extensive comments in *Scorsese on Scorsese*, p. 136.
15. A brilliant discussion of the homosexual subtexts in *Raging Bull* and *King of Comedy* is to be found in Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 245-269.
16. *Boston Phoenix*, op. cit., p. 7.
17. Oswald Stack, *Pasolini* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 109.

Taxi Blues

Director: Pavel Lounguine. Producer: Marin Karmitz. Script: Lounguine. Photography: Denis Evstigneev. Editing: Elizabeth Guido. MKII.

The taxi driver and the jazz musician could be said to share the dubious honor of symbolizing twentieth-century urban malaise, a form of decadence generally absent from Soviet cinema. Now, to guide us through the Marxist malaise that has straddled glasnost, comes film-maker Pavel Lounguine with *Taxi Blues*, about a Moscow taxi driver who tries to rehabilitate a saxophonist. The scenarior of this buddy movie about a worker and an artist suggests—as the director's sympathies ultimately come down on the side of the worker—you can take the character out of Communism but you can't take Communism out of the character.

The film opens up in a cab containing four men cruising Moscow by night in search of excitement to match their own frenzied debauchery. Slowly the gang of four peel off to go home to sleep, leaving the cash-brandishing Liocha (Piotr Mamonov) alone to order the driver Schlikov (Piotr Zaitchenko) all over Moscow. Near dawn, Liocha disappears into one of those mammoth rabbit-warren apartment buildings on the edge of the city, promising to return to pay Schlikov. The cabbie waits and waits—and realizes, long after the audience, that he's been stiffed on the cab fare. Furious, he sets out to find the man, through the not so picturesque, quasi-criminal Soviet milieu best detailed in journalist Yuri Brokhin's fascinating report of Moscow's underworld in *Hustling on Gorky Street* (Dial Press, 1975).

Schlikov finally tracks down his erstwhile passenger, only to discover Liocha is now penniless but willing to pay Schlikov with some of his fashionable western clothing. Schlikov brutally insists Liocha work off the debt by washing cars for the taxi syndicate and even moves Liocha in with him to keep Liocha from destroying himself in drunken brawls.

Because Schlikov has confiscated a sax, we learn that Liocha has been a relatively famous musician, who has burned a lot of bridges through irresponsible behavior. We see Schlikov go to a black marketeer to establish the value of the saxophone he has taken from Liocha. Schlikov's reaction to the high price he has been offered makes us appreciate his reluctance to just sell it outright. Schlikov doesn't say it, but surely, anybody in his world with an instrument that valuable is worth saving, and Schlikov's social responsibility is to induce the same in Liocha.

We meet a music director who refuses to book Liocha into concerts, but we also hear him play a soulful solo in a hallway, which he can only do, he tells Schlikov, when the mood is right. The mood is clearly not right when he's maintaining a disciplined work day. The blues only thrive when he is down and out; success can undermine art just as effectively as the work ethic. This is nothing new to the Western world where musicians regularly self-destruct, but it would be a hard heart that did not take pity on the refined fingers and urbane profile of Liocha bent over a pail of hot suds to scrub the grime off a hulking local cab—a clumsy object that in no way shares the elegant curves and metallic gleam of the saxophone which is his destiny.

Noteworthy in this context is that the role of Liocha is played by a notorious Russian rock musician. Mamanov is the lead singer of a rock group called "Zvouki-Mu" which he organized in 1983—now under contract to the versatile performer and producer Brian Eno, who produced their first album in London. When director Lounguine began searching for the right actor to play his charming, egotistical character, he claims he had a Dustin Hoffman type in mind, but realized that kind of actor simply did not exist among Moscow's academy-trained thespians.

Mamanov, explains Lounguine, "was a mythical figure in Moscow—he is the oldest Russian rock star—well-known for his wild lifestyle, his excesses. . . . He was, in fact, the ideal image of my musician: completely sincere, both fragile and weak but also inscrutable, strong, and cold; someone whom one could kill, but not influence, who would not

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surrender, nor follow an official ideology; he does not destroy anyone, he can only destroy himself." One could call this a perfect description of a dissident by a non-dissident.

Watching Liocha performing demeaning physical labor reminds us of all the rebels and intellectuals sent in the Communist world to farms and reclamation projects designed to reclaim the land but break the spirit. However appalling that may have been, our sympathies with Schlikov's situation force us to reconsider the resentments that drove the peasant leadership to punish the intellectuals and artists whom they perceived as exploitative of the working class.

The rehabilitation of Liocha here is one of personal not state retribution, but the conflict mirrors cases heard of from Gulags aplenty. Still, how are we to judge Liocha's utter disregard of Schlikov's needs and duties? How is Liocha to repay Schlikov, for example, after wandering away with a bathtub running—destroying the structural integrity of the building as the water sweeps away the floor and ceiling to the tune of tens of thousands of rubles which Schlikov, not Liocha, will have to pay? Is Liocha's "fuck you" attitude justified because his artistic nature has been stifled by a grey, conformist world?

Schlikov is not such a brute that he has no concept of Liocha's skill and art, and we see with what propriety and care he arranges an evening of celebration for a lady friend Christina (Natalia Koliakanova) to which he invites Liocha—to, among other things, blow his horn. It ends in dionysiac disaster, as Christina opts for Liocha and the champagne spills and the table gets danced on and Schlikov's hopes for sharing a fine little party are doused. Clearly, Christina or any other red-blooded Russian girl would seize the sexy Liocha over the paunchy Schlikov. This humiliation of Schlikov is not out of any diabolical design by the young folk, but it is the predictable fallout from the explosive chemistry between a young girl with a clear eye for the main chance and a saxophonist all too willing to observe a tradition of his trade vis-à-vis women. And it sets Schlikov apart with the older, fuddy-duddy generation who prefer gentility to anarchy.

Schlikov shares the view of many good folk, not the least of them Tolstoy, that art should uplift and ennoble us. What jazz does for us is surely more complex. From the point of view of the cab-

Worker vs. artist: *Taxi Blues*

bie comrade, jazz took a suspiciously long time to gain acceptance in the Communist world. Only after jazz apologists proved that historically it was an expression of underclass rebellion in the capitalist world was it deemed acceptable (in the 1960s) then officially embraced in the 1970s, "without bothering to justify itself ideologically," notes S. Frederick Starr, author of *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union* (Oxford University Press, 1983).

In the concluding paragraph of this book, Starr predicts "The present young adult generation is the first in Soviet history to share fully in European and American popular culture. . . . The young people will feel at home in conversations about music with contemporaries from any other industrial society. The outsiders will be those members of the older generation in the USSR, who grew up with the Marxist belief that the Soviet economic system must inevitably produce a unique form of popular culture, remote from the jazz and pop music of the 'decadent' West."

Cultural exchange has been intense in the 1980s —here reflected in the visit of a minor jazz musician, Hall Singer playing himself, as the catalyst that permits Liocha a way out of his virtual slavery to Schlikov. Of course, Schlikov does not conceive of himself as dictatorial, but he is certainly a

dedicated task master and restraining principle on Liocha's excess and extravagance. Their love/hate relationship gives Schlikov a mission: to bring Liocha into the realms of normalcy and to prune his extravagance. Schlikov is sincere about this; he is, in a sense, too good and not intelligent enough not to be sincere. Liocha resists and rebels in a downward spiral of self-destruction in the face of Schlikov's ham-handed pedantry. When Westerners visiting Moscow conveniently rescue him and Hal Singer takes him back to the USA, he is "discovered" and celebrated. The coincidence of this "solution" to Liocha's dilemma and spin on the narrative doesn't affect the significance of the film (although Western critics tend to abhore coincidence of any kind).

Liocha's encounter with Hal Singer is not just the stuff careers are made of; it also reflects the nature of East/West detente, which is always initiated on a cultural level. Black jazz musicians are part of a tradition in the USSR of importing international culture, whose high point was established with the proud appearances of Paul Robeson in the optimistic fifties, and the role they played in encouraging the Russians to believe in the potential for a friendship with the American leftist community cannot be underestimated. Ergo, Hal Singer's function in this scenario recalls that other great period of hope when Stalin was gone and Khrushchev could pound his shoe on the table, visit Disneyland in the name of the Russian people, and threaten to bury us. In the age of glasnost, Russian visitors need not be heads of state; in fact, the folksier they are, the more likely they are to be cheered on both sides—and less likely to want to bury us.

In *Taxi Blues*, mass communications guarantee that the folks at home are informed of Liocha's success abroad. Schlikov is stunned to see his errant friend on a super-sized public screen in the middle of a Moscow night. Schlikov experiences a mixed reaction to the way this thieving drunkard is being ballyhooed in the West, but by the time Liocha returns, we see the typically proud response of socialists when one of their number makes it in America. Schlikov slicks himself up to meet Liocha at the airport with his cab and bring him back to their old home where he has put out the best feast Moscow can afford. Will fame induce forgiveness?

The vanity we have already seen in Liocha has been further inflated in the West. He is swept away in a crowd of chic admirers to a limo, leaving Schlikov alone, unseen at the airport. Liocha promises to call people in the facile style of Western celebrities. He is glib, cynical, and mocking: through Schlikov's eyes, which is decisive for an interpretation of the film, Liocha is a disgrace and now probably a permanently "superfluous man," as the non-productive person has been dubbed in Soviet ideology. To the Schlikovs, who worked hard to build a new world and be worthy of a new world order, especially after all the sacrifices of the Great Patriotic War (as WWII is known), it is treachery to succumb to the West and its plastic values as Liocha does.

From Liocha's point of view, however, the West offers fun, a commodity as rare as shad roe in the USSR. On his welcome home spree, he bestows his presence on Schlikov for a late, brief moment; it's like a nightmare apparition. The outrageous souvenirs he has brought from America are trivial, but it is their very triviality that brightens up the grim existence of Moscow where life-important, substantive products come off the assembly line just as chintzy as the inflatable doll Liocha has bought at an American sex shop. His souvenirs report on a land of Mickey Mouse and flashy folderol, an impossible distance from the life of a Moscow cabbie.

Lounguine has created characters so totally incompatible that they seem to stand at opposite ends of the dialectic that has evolved out of the Marxism that retains a hold on the moral fiber of the Soviet Union. Some may take a flying leap into the arms of the West, while the loyal socialists survey the debris of their once brave new world. If a society advances from lethargy to hedonism, can it be called progress? Or, as a famous piece of graffiti claims, "Soviet paralysis is the most progressive paralysis in the world." This tension between cynicism and a once great mission is at the core of *Taxi Blues*, the debut directorial effort which brought Lounguine the prize for Best Director at the 1990 Cannes film festival and spurred great debate among Western critics as to whether Lounguine is pro- or anti-Communist.

Pavel Lounguine was born in 1949, the son of a prominent scriptwriter. Add to his ancestry a mother who translates French literature into Russian, and it comes as no surprise that Lounguine matured into an intellectual and turned to the live-

liest arts of his time. He studied structuralism and linguistics at Moscow University and obtained an additional degree in screen direction and scriptwriting. Some ten of his screenplays have been made into films, yet he claims to have put more concentration and energy into attempts to get a visa to visit Paris than into his work. At last, in 1987, he succeeded and found himself "in a world where my difference, my skepticism and irony were no longer faults. I suddenly found myself interesting," as he has written in the preface to the film's press book.

Perhaps the frustrations of an intellectual drove him to write the "taxi half" of *Taxi Blues*, yet the "blues half" is better explained by his observation that to go abroad as a Russian these days offers an opportunity to "find oneself interesting." For as long as the East was considered shut off by an Iron Curtain, the West's interest in it and its inhabitants was often patronizing, expressed primarily in well-intentioned attempts to deliver oppressed people from the horrors of a police state, homeland be damned. Now that the door has been opened, we—as well as they—can't help but wonder how Eastern Europeans and Soviets will deal with this new desperation. Will they abandon the ideological training of seven decades? Or, to adapt the old Tinseltown joke: perhaps underneath all the shiny, superficial Communism is real, authentic Communism.

In Schlikov, who speaks for the masses, Lounguine explores an earnest character whose severity and stolid determination make him almost a parody of the desiderata of the Workers Paradise. But Lounguine delineates that personality type with a depth that achieves more than sheer comedic effect. We develop not only sympathy but also a renewed respect for the fragile balance of duty and service that inform the life of this all but forgotten common man. Poor old Schlikov struggles to maintain his personal dignity and some semblance of social order in the face of the charming but anarchic jazz musician, whose extraordinary opportunity to see how the other half lives only makes him flaunt his success and again let down his friends in inventive new ways.

It is the artistic, selfish saxophonist Liocha in the film who clearly finds himself interesting, reveling in being part of the glasnost glitz and wallowing in Western paraphernalia without ever having understood what possibilities lay beyond the souvenir shops. Again, Lounguine limns the character

End of a Liocha extravagance: *Taxi Blues*

with almost embarrassing intimacy. He leads his life as a barometer, a performer who responds only to an audience, a man who seems most aware of himself as the object of someone else's attention.

It has been said that in the oppressive atmosphere of Eastern Europe, there was no such thing as friendship; state police could get at a person through the undeniable relationship of family but to vaunt friendship, especially with "unpredictable types" (as artists are known both here and there) was to make oneself vulnerable to the highly unpredictable state security forces. For Liocha to try to strike up a friendship with a visiting American, even in glasnost Moscow, denotes a degree of chutzpah for an artist precariously out-of-favor. That he should then manage to travel out of the USSR with this friend and turn it into a televised success tells us that Liocha—in his own element—is not as self-destructive as we may think from seeing him in the working man's milieu.

Travelling abroad has always offered a transforming experience for artists from the socialist world, where the obsession with the West has meant decades of self-pity, self-denial, and a lack of self-knowledge, even among the intelligentsia. It has also been a commonplace that you cannot get free from Mother Russia without the umbilical cord of the nation/state getting wrapped around your neck. Freedom—so Tarkovsky asserted—was inseparable from conscience; Tarkovsky's films were visionary explorations of what that means. Lounguine is anything but a visionary, yet this film seems to be about what happens to a nation as its vision dies. For showing us how the Russians are reacting to the first winds of change, Lounguine

has a reportorial sense of realism and detail and a knack for conflict and mixed motivation that recalls Jerry Schatzberg's *Scarecrow*. Although his debut has a hip panache, it shows us a Soviet Union capable of more changes in style than in content; what's bred in the bone comes out in the film.

KAREN JAEHNE

Yaaba

Director: Idrissa Ouedraogo. Producer: Freddy Denaes, Pierre-Alain Meier, and Ouedraogo. Screenplay: Ouedraogo. Photography: Mathias Kalin. Editing: Loredana Cristelli. Music: Francis Bebey. New Yorker Films.

Since the mid-1980s, a series of Marxist-Leninist governments have attempted to extricate Burkina Faso from an unfortunate legacy of French colonialism. Nonetheless, the West African nation is one of many Third World countries struggling to combat poverty. Given the cycle of impoverishment and First World neglect that has marred recent African history, one might have expected *Yaaba*, as a film produced within Burkina Faso's film industry, to replicate the committed stance of what has come to be known as "Third Cinema." Yet Idrissa Ouedraogo's *Yaaba* is a deceptively simple parable, filmed in an unadorned, lucid style. *Yaaba* derives its plot from an African tale of the oral tradition. It is the story of two youngsters, Napoko (the girl), and Billa (the boy), and an elderly woman. The woman is ostracized by the villagers who accuse her of being a witch and therefore responsible for the village's misfortunes. However, the youngsters recognize that the elderly woman is often blamed for what she has not done and decide to befriend her. They nickname her "Yaaba," meaning grandmother.

Yaaba exemplifies a number of important trends in contemporary African cinema. It is made in a style that could be called "elitist" and "individualistic"—combining various comedic modes with moral nuance in a fashion that reveals the contours of a revivified pan-African strategy. This strategy manifests itself in the shared consensus of African film-makers' quest for authentic treatment of African issues in a style that not only inscribes African identity in African films but also renders the films competitive in the international market. The appropriation of neorealist techniques by Third World film-makers has been well documented, and Ouedraogo fuses the neorealist penchant for eliciting polished performances from nonprofessionals with the African narrative tradition of the griot (oral storyteller).

The first decade of African cinema produced socially and politically inspired films that were didactic and aimed at mass indoctrination rather than entertainment. But in the eighties when the second generation of African film-makers emerged, this didactic trend underwent a dramatic change. This orientation was gradually replaced by a pragmatic aesthetic approach, and there is now a tangible possibility that African cinema will become a major industry. African themes continue to be addressed, but, under this imperative, recent African films have shown the propensity to advance the innovative techniques of the pioneering ones. Examples of this strain of African film-making include Souleymane Cissé's *Yeelen* (Mali, 1987), Kwaw Ansah's *Heritage Africa* (Ghana, 1988), Flora Gomes's *Mortu Nega* (Guinea-Bissau, 1988), Ngangura Mweze/Benoit Lamy's *La vie est belle* (Zaire/Belgium, 1986), and Henry Duparc's *Bal poussière* (Ivory Coast, 1988). These films have taken as their departure point the oral tradition of African narrative—the legacy of stories, songs, dances, and rituals used to disseminate information and express messages of societal concern to the collectivity. The representative of this collectivity is the griot, a person whose skill can heighten the impact of a particular narrative which often possesses historical and cultural significance. The "new" African cinema interweaves elements of melodrama, satire, and comedy in a manner that attempts to satisfy the spectator's appetite for entertainment. *Yaaba* typifies this trend and exemplifies the goals of the new crop of African film-makers.

Ordinarily, *Yaaba*'s story, in terms of cinematic storytelling, would be dismissed as too amateurish. But, as in the oral tradition, a story's interest and attraction for an audience depend on how creatively a storyteller embellishes what he has heard or taken from his own experience. Although *Yaaba*'s story line is basically simple, the film itself commands a universal appeal due to the sophisticated ability of the director to unite all the essential ele-

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ments operating in the film. Here, bits of humor, comedy, and satire coalesce into an idiosyncratic cinematic style which highlights societal mores and those who attempt to undermine them. In terms of *mise-en-scène*, every detail is conveyed by the extraordinary framing of a static camera. In a sequence in which the camera lingers on villagers playing a traditional West African game, participants proceed in and out of frame in a fashion that unobtrusively captures the flux of traditional life. Similarly, skillful editing promotes rhythmic progression of disparate episodes. Attention to visual detail is coupled with Francis Bebey's effective score, which makes use of indigenous string and reed instruments to heighten solemn moments (e.g., during a long take which recounts Yaaba's burial) as well as carefree ones.

The film's emotional power is largely due to the choice of Yaaba as the village scapegoat. Her old age leaves her vulnerable to superstition since elderly people are among those most suspected to be witches. This stigma does not, however, render her any less the wise, quiet, calculated, taciturn, and highly spirited person she is. Anyone familiar with African culture knows the tremendous respect accorded elders—which is, of course, withheld from Yaaba. This respect begins in the family and is ordinarily unconditional. The aged, like the sick, for instance, are taken care of within the home and members of the family, including the extended family, are obligated to contribute their quota. Contrary to what occurs in the West where, for instance, government welfare programs are substituted for family care, in African society close-knit family relations eliminate the horrors of old age. The old people are indispensable, they are above all loved irrespective of how rich or destitute they may be. In *Yaaba*, the old woman is denied this important benefit of her life, ostracized and driven to despair by the villagers. Yaaba is apparently childless; although she grew up in the sophisticated caring system of African communalism she cannot reap the benefits of an extended family—having been dismissed with ignominy. This desertion causes other members of the village community to ridicule her; in one scene we see them throwing stones at her. She survives the resulting wound and it is Nopoko and even more Bila who show sensitivity to her predicament. At one point, when the children call her "Yaaba," she is elated. "This is the first time that someone has called me Grandmother, and that makes me happy," she says—as she and Bila eat

Yaaba: Noufrou Ouedraogo as Bila and Roukietou Barry as Nopoko

the chicken that Bila has stolen from the village to feed her.

As a rule, stealing in the village, as in many other societies, contravenes ethical and moral codes. However, there is good reason for Bila to steal the chicken for Yaaba to eat; it is out of sympathy as well as a matter of subsistence, since Yaaba is unable to trap meat for herself. Nopoko and Bila represent the values of modern Africa and serve as a bridge between the present and the past which symbolize Yaaba's tumultuous environment. Here, the film seems to suggest that there is need to abandon superstition and critically examine the causes and effects of all societal circumstances before crucial judgments can be arbitrarily imposed. Yaaba's ordeal reveals that what is associated with the past is not necessarily at odds with the present; her wisdom is reincarnated in the vision of Nopoko and Bila, who in this respect represent both future and hope. This quest for future and hope is strongly entrenched in the solidarity of Bila's prophetic utterance, when after Yaaba's house is burned down by mean-spirited villagers, we hear him say to her, "I will build another house for you."

In another sequence when Bila is accosted by the village bullies (a group of youngsters about the same age as Bila and Nopoko), a fight ensues and Nopoko rushes to the aid of her friend Bila, and she is cut by a rusty knife held by one of the assailants. Nopoko becomes infected and falls ill, causing her mother to fear she has contracted tetanus. After all medical attention fails to cure Nopoko, it is the medicine of Taryaina, a native doctor who is connected with Yaaba, that provides a cure for her ailment. Once again, Yaaba's wisdom prevails. Bila serves as the go-between, the link between Yaaba and the native doctor, although Nopoko's mother must hide Taryaina's medicine from her husband who does not want anything to do with the witch or her native doctor. Nopoko's recovery synthesizes the film's attempt to reconcile past and future. Bila's endeavor to repudiate suspicion, superstition, and ignorance speaks of a desire for understanding between the young and the old, past and present. The temptation to disparage Yaaba's traditionalism and Taryaina's values (the healer's medical roots originate from traditional culture) is offset by the fact that recourse to these ancient remedies prolongs Nopoko's and Bila's lives. Ouedraogo's respectful treatment of Taryaina is part of the film's dialectic between traditional wisdom and the sometimes dubious "progress" wrought by modernity.

In all African societies, adultery and divorce are taboos. Within the rural milieu of *Yaaba*, adultery and divorce are condemned since they threaten communal solidarity and family cohesiveness. In the film, Ouedraogo displays all three, not through commentary but as plot elements meant to entertain spectators, not instruct them. Thus, when he shows us an attractive young woman, Koudi, married to Noaga, an alcoholic, who is having an affair with a local charlatan, it is not surprising that he bypasses the implication of such a serious taboo subject by showing her comically upbraiding her husband for being impotent. Since Noaga is unable to sexually satisfy Koudi, a farcical transference of guilt occurs in which the promiscuous wife absolves herself of any responsibility. Yet, the beautiful woman cannot leave her husband because of the matrimonial bond consecrated in traditional doctrine. This narrative ploy is in sharp contrast to Sembene's *Xala*, a film in which impotence suggests a larger political metaphor, an allegorical strategy that is absent from the more prosaic plot twists of *Yaaba*.

Stealing, bickering, gossiping, eavesdropping, and juvenile deliquency are portrayed, no doubt flaunting the strict moral code of a community deemed closely knit. But behavioral strictures are not the primary focus in *Yaaba*, even if the dilemma seems to extend far beyond the mere question of moral decay. Although much of the film's strength lies in its whimsical irony, Ouedraogo nonetheless does not seem to have a clear vision of the African future, and there is cause to wonder whether *Yaaba*'s parabolic structural oppositions truly illuminate societal conflicts. In one sequence for example, a little quarrel breaks out between a couple, but instead of showing them fighting, in the next shot a door opens and both of them end up in a romantic embrace—this is like saying, sarcastically of course, "If this is how couples fight, no one will ever cry." In another instance, the mother of three delinquent youngsters who are constantly berating other members of the community is shown turning a deaf ear to the atrocities committed by her own children.

In *Yaaba*, the director creates expressive rhythm through characterization and meticulous attention

to detail. The marvelous performances of the non-professional actors increases the stark realism and simplicity of the narrative which in turn focuses attention on the film's drama. In the end, the spectator is left with the feeling that the compassionate human drama as it unfolds in the village where love, evil, fear, superstition, and intolerance coalesce are revelations that only an insider can convey. For example, by making Yaaba a scapegoat, in this case, accused of being a witch and therefore, responsible for the evils afflicting the society, the film touches upon a subject which is crucially important for understanding African culture. For instance, in colonialist discourse witchcraft is denigrated as "superstition," "demonic" and "primitive," endemic to the "dark continent." Although the subject of witchcraft is used to enhance the storyline, it is not used tendentiously to either valorize African tradition or dismiss it as irrational. In this respect the film exemplifies an African sensibility in its effort to sensitively represent certain aspects of African culture.

The various episodes and segments that compose *Yaaba*'s structure are seamlessly constructed. Along with the utter simplicity of the narrative pattern and his careful attention to detail, Ouedraogo knows when to alternate long-takes and fast cutting, silence and sound, light and dark. For example, the scene in which Bila takes food to Yaaba and discovers she has died progresses with rapid cutting—Bila running to inform the villagers and then returning, forward to the burial sequence where the action is slowed down deliberately by the employment of the long take. The scene in which Koudi is seen wanting to have sex with Noaga, her alcoholic husband (which comes to no avail) is showered with chiaroscuro lighting but also features an alternation between silent and sound—reminiscent of Fritz Lang's *M*—that expedites our anticipation. Thus a static camera watches the young beauty as she struggles to arouse her husband, who is snoring loudly. When she fails to awaken him, she resigns to melancholy, twisting and wiggling in silence. This silence is broken momentarily by whistling from outside. When Koudi walks to the window, the camera shows her submerged in light and dark looking out the window into the night until we are made to understand that it is her lover, Razougou, signalling for attention.

The dialogue spoken throughout the film is sparse and delivered in Moore, Burkina Faso's mother tongue, with English subtitles, though most people who have seen the film agree it can be understood without them. The emphasis on image over heavy-handed dialogue is increasingly common in African cinema. The multiplicity of African languages demands the breakdown of language barriers, enabling films to cut across boundaries. The desire to internationalize black African cinema in order to gain larger audiences and reap greater financial benefits currently defines the structure of the "new" African film.

In terms of universal acceptability and commercial viability, *Yaaba* is exceptional if not unprecedented in the history of black African cinema. It is one of the few African films that has made it to international commercial screens, and remarkably so, in box-office terms. Following its critical acclaim at Cannes (it was selected as the opening night event of the Directors Fortnight) the film has played to large enthusiastic audiences in Africa, Europe, Asia and the US, thus shattering the exclusion from commercial theaters that has long plagued African cinema.

However, *Yaaba*'s innovative tendencies seem to obscure some of the flaws in this film which we think should be pointed out in the interest of Ouedraogo's future projects. The fight sequence is an example where the action is abruptly ended without the dramatic development that would have both sustained the viewer's curiosity and allowed the drama to build. Similarly, many sequences seem all too predictable due to the deployment of stock characters and clichéd plot devices. *Yaaba*'s admittedly diverting vignettes do not have the power to suggest the historical resonances achieved by a film such as Hondo's *Sarraounia* or the nuanced depiction of African ritual explored in Cissé's *Yeelen*.

Yaaba is unquestionably an impressive film. Ouedraogo succeeds in forging an individual style derived from two narrative orientations: the tradition of oral storyteller and the conventions of mainstream cinema. It is to be hoped that Ouedraogo's subsequent films will continue to reflect accurately the full variety of African tradition and succeed in a "new" African cinema's mission to acquaint a wider audience with the full breadth of genuine African perspectives.

N. FRANK UKADIKE
& RICHARD PORTON

Books

Screwball

Hollywood's Madcap Romntic Comedies

By Ed Sikov. New York: Crown, 1989. $35.00

There's something subversive about Ed Sikov's book on screwball comedy. It looks like a glossy, expensively produced, profusely illustrated, coffee-table book, designed for the pleasurable perusal of the typically alienated consumer who no longer reads seriously but merely skims distractedly. And, I suppose, it is—at least at first glance. But it is also more than this.

Sikov's elegantly written text entertains but it also sustains a fairly sophisticated level of argumentation. The photographs—all of them in gorgeous black and white—catch the eye as a series of attractions in themselves, but they have also been selected and arranged with remarkable intelligence. Text and photos do not merely accompany one another, as in most picture books, they complement one another. It's as if the book's argument was being made visually as well as verbally, thought through in images *and* words, much as the screwball comedies it discusses were more than 50 years ago.

In an era in which writing about film has become increasingly ghettoized, Sikov's book represents a unique attempt to cross over boundaries between audiences that the academicization of film scholarship has erected over the last twenty years; this mass-market picture book is written in such a way that it speaks to several audiences at once—as film books used to do in the 1960s when journalists (like Andrew Sarris) and scholars (like Robin Wood or Peter Wollen) not only still read and talked with one another but still spoke the same jargon-free language. It addresses general readers interested in the gloss and glamor of Hollywood, film buffs fixated on stars, studios, screenwriters, and screen directors, as well as serious film scholars concerned with questions of genre, sexual identity, and class.

In other words, Sikov pitches his book so as to baffle all batters from casual readers looking for fat, juicy curves to hard-nosed academics waiting for a fast ball; what we have here is a work of genuine screwball proportions; this is what can only be described as "screwball scholarship."

You've seen a couple of films and you think you know something about 1930s comedies; screwball comedies contain zany characters, like the Marx Bros., they are the product of the Depression for whose victims they provide escapist fare, and they consist of a finite number of well-known films—*The Awful Truth, Bringing Up Baby, Easy Living, Holiday, It Happened One Night, Nothing Sacred,* and *Twentieth Century,* right? Not quite. The Marx Bros., since they are not a romantic couple, do not qualify as screwball types; the 1934 Production Code's regulations against the depiction of sexuality, not the Depression, created the genre; and the above-mentioned films represent only the tip of a larger iceberg, which embraces scores of films ranging from the well-known sublime (*The Lady Eve, Palm Beach Story*) to the unknown ridiculous (*Public Deb No. 1, Red Salute*).

You've taught screwball comedy a couple of times, relying heavily on Andrew Bergman's thesis about social reconciliation and Stanley Cavell's notion of remarriage only to discover, after reading Sikov, that neither Bergman nor Cavell can account for more than a handful of the films that have been canonized as screwball comedy classics. What could Bergman do with Hawks (especially *Twentieth Century, His Girl Friday, Ball of Fire, I Was a Male War Bride,* and *Monkey Business*) and what could Cavell do with *The Mad Miss Manton, The Major and the Minor, Midnight, My Man Godfrey, Nothing Sacred, Theodora Goes Wild, The Thin Man,* and *You Can't Take it With You?* What Sikov (following Sarris) does is to identify screwball comedies as films in which attractive, romantic leads engage in slapstick (rather than delegating it to their inferiors) in lieu of explicit sexual activity, expressing genuine feelings for one another through physical violence and then to break the genre down into a series of subgenres, which qualify this central relationship (e.g., newspaper screwballs such as *Libeled Lady, Nothing Sacred,* and *His Girl Friday;* screwball mysteries such as *The*

Thin Man series, *The Ex-Mrs. Bradford,* and *The Mad Miss Manton;* films about screwball families such as *My Man Godfrey, Fifth Avenue Girl,* and *You Can't Take it With You;* and other generic variations). Along the way, Sikov discovers and promotes a number of new additions to the old list of screwball classics—Jack Conway's *Love Crazy,* William Seiter's *The Moon's Our Home,* and Garson Kanin's *My Favorite Wife.*

What's missing is an explanation of factors leading to the demise of the screwball comedy. Though Sikov, in discussing *Unfaithfully Yours,* points to a "shifting perspective" towards violence in comedies made after World War II, he extends the genre well into the postwar period by including within it late Hawks comedies such as *Male War Bride* (1949) and *Monkey Business* (1952). Surprisingly, Sikov does not discuss the erosion of the 1934 Production Code in the 1950s nor the regeneration of the long-repressed sex comedy, which died with (the pre-Code) Jean Harlow and which was reborn with Marilyn Monroe and Jayne Mansfield in the fifties—indications that the displacement of romantic, sexual heat onto violent, physical slapstick was no longer necessary in the postwar era. My desire for closure undoubtedly casts me as an academic, however, and, as I've suggested earlier, Sikov is not quite willing to throw the pitches I want. But what else could you expect from a book dedicated to an academic (Bill Paul) and a movie star (Carole Lombard)? JOHN BELTON

Blackframes

Critical Perspectives on Black Independent Cinema

Edited by Mbye B. Cham and Andrade-Watkins, Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1989. $9.95

This eighty-five page booklet of essays is an interesting addition to other critical examinations of independent black film in the English-speaking world. For example, *Black Cinema Aesthetics: Issues in Independent Black Filmmaking* (1982?) and *Le Cinéma Noir Américain* (CinemAction, 1988) have also discussed similar issues and topics as concern the six black, male writers whose essays begin and end *Blackframes.* A telling feature of the two other works is their inclusion of articles written by black women. The absence of essays by black women here is regrettable, especially since essays authored by black women are now included in white-edited film anthologies such as Charlotte Brunsdon's *Films For Women* (1986) and E. Diedre Pribram's *Female Spectators* (1988).

Blackframes has three very brief historical surveys of black anglophone, independent film in the United States, England, and Africa entitled, respectively, "Images of Blacks in Black Independent Films," "The Cultural Context of Black British Cinema," and "Film in Anglophone Africa." The essays on black American and African independent film rely too heavily on secondary sources and have little, if any, original scholarship.

"Images of Blacks in Black Independent Films" merely paraphrases Thomas Cripps (1978) and Clyde Taylor's "Decolonizing the Image" (*Jump Cut* 28: 1984); while endnotes include the works of James Monaco (1981) and James R. Nesteby (1982), the essayist seems to have overlooked Taylor's seminal article on recent black independent cinema. Ironically, the article resembles Taylor's (1984) archaeology of independent black film-making during the 1960s–1970s. In addition, the essay lacks any documented references to any black film critics, as if they had written nothing important on the subject. "Film in Anglophone Africa" makes use of the scholarship by both black and white film critics in France, Africa, and the United States. Unfortunately, the essay does little to advance a critical history of anglophone African cinema because of its reliance on mediocre secondary sources which neither discuss the absence of women film-makers, nor discuss the socioeconomic function of state-controlled and commercial film production in Africa.

Until recently, Jim Pines worked for the British Film Institute and enjoyed an almost unquestioned reign over funding for the independent black film-making collectives. His essay, "The Cultural Context of Black British Cinema," is a brief history of the beginnings of Afro-British film-making. The essay critically assesses the filmic construction of race and multiculturalism within contemporary Britain. Pines writes, "It is more than simply a matter of Black film-makers projecting 'positive' images of Black people." Pines critiques the old-guard of

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black film studies because their analyses tend to confine black film history to a closed system of black stereotypes. Fortunately, he recognizes the importance of the postnegritude polymorphous nature of black subjectivity. He sees this open-ended subjectivity in recent Afro-British films. Unlike the two other surveys, Pines discusses the break with conventionally fixed race relations and multicultural representation. He points to a postnegritude move toward "broad questions of gender and sexuality from a Black 'feminist' perspective" as dramatized in Sankofa's *Passion of Remembrance* (1986). This postnegritude moment, in which black monoliths are fractured, is present in the independent cinemas of anglophone Africa and Afro-America.

The remaining three essays in *Blackframes* introduce theoretical approaches to the study of black film. Again, each of the three essays express a regional Afro-British or African-American or African focus. This separate nationalistic approach needs scrutinizing since it works against the possibility of an international black film theory which addresses issues of class, race, nationality, gender, and sexuality within a collectivity of blackframes.

MARK A. REID

Feminism and Film Theory

Edited by Constance Penley. New York: Routledge, 1988.

To understand the impulse behind *Feminism and Film Theory,* it is perhaps necessary to read the anthology's title quite literally. Not a general anthology of feminist film writing, *Feminism and Film Theory* is specifically concerned with that feminist research which addresses directly the issues of film *theory* as it has evolved from its classic phase to a French-inspired newer mode: issues such as the nature of the cinematic apparatus; the reality of the filmic signifier; the quality of cinematic representation; the role of narrative enunciation; and so on.

Within feminism's specific encounters with film theory, the anthology gives greatest attention to the work of the journal *Camera Obscura.* To take one example, *Camera Obscura*'s frequent concern with the contradictions (or not) of mainstream fictional cinema in relation to the subversiveness (or not) of alternate and experimental forms is a concern that immediately opens up onto theoretical questions—for instance, can certain forms of cinema escape the seduction of the imaginary signifier? Such theoretical interrogation from *Camera Obscura* on the possibility for a cinematic deconstruction of traditional cinematic form is given one representation in the anthology by an essay like Liz Lyon's on Marguerite Duras, with extended close analysis of scenes from *India Song.* The anthology also includes work from other journals for whom specific feminist readings depend on broad theoretical reflection: for example, Laura Mulvey on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" and Jacqueline Rose on filmic paranoia, both from *Screen;* Elizabeth Cowie on the notion of the Progressive Text from *m/f;* Mary Ann Doane on femininity as absence in narrative cinema from *enclitic;* Joan Copjec on avant-garde repetition and the cinematic apparatus from *October.*

At the same time, the anthology gives attention to those traditions of film theoretical activity that contributed to the elaboration of new feminist investigation of theoretical issues. On the one hand, the book offers samples of classic feminist film theory work that inspired recent thinking: for example, Laura Mulvey's studies of visual pleasure and gendered spectatorship; or Pam Cook and Claire Johnston's reflection on the possibilities of female authorship in classic cinema or their theoretical rethinking of sociologically oriented "Images of Women" studies. On the other hand, the anthology also proposes discussions of works in film theory that, while not always explicitly feminist, seem complementary to feminist theorization: for example, around one-fourth of the book engages with the theories of Raymond Bellour, such as his contention that the mass of Hollywood narratives are driven by the Oedipus complex and its goal of successfully sublimated couple-formation.

Even if (or especially if) the essays in *Feminism and Film Theory* represent, in Constance Penley's own words, "one distinct and insistently polemical strain of feminist film criticism," the anthology should not be read apart from other current work in feminist film study: for example, the writings of Judith Mayne, Tania Modleski, Teresa de Lauretis, Lucy Fischer, and Linda Williams, among others.

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Intriguingly, the last pages of Penley's introduction to *Feminism and Film Theory* themselves direct one's reading back to the larger sphere of feminist criticism and to an articulation of this volume within that sphere for, as Penley notes, theory itself is in the process of being redefined so that it can engage with concrete issues of history and cultural production.

DANA POLAN

& Controversy Correspondence

House of Games

In his article "Psychoanalysis and Con Games" (*FQ*, Summer 190), William Van Wert comes to the surprising conclusion that the scene in *House of Games* in which the character of Dr. Margaret Ford (Lindsay Crouse) kills the con man Mike (Joe Mantegna) occurs only in Margaret's mind, presumably as part of a self-analytical healing process. This despite the fact that director David Mamet has provided absolutely none of the usual cinematic clues that a scene is fantasy.

Unfortunately for Van Wert's peculiar interpretation, he is factually incorrect about most of the points which he uses to support his position. This is especially odd given his assertion that the viewer must be willing to watch the film repeatedly in order to discern its "true" meaning. I will pass over several minor errors the author has made about other scenes in the film, and move straight to the major points of the crucial scene in the airport.

Van Wert claims that the first clue that this scene is "happening on the psychic stage" is the first gunshot Margaret fires into Mike's leg. He states that although Mike is hit in the leg, the pistol is pointed up. But a close look at the film proves that this is not so. In the quick close-up in which Margaret cocks the gun, we are facing her, and the barrel is dead level. Cut to a view over her shoulder, with Mike walking away: she aims and fires, but her right arm and the pistol are completely hidden from our view. There is no reason to feel that the gun was not aimed straight at his legs. Mike takes the bullet, and in the next shot we are facing Margaret again. Only now is the barrel inclined slightly upwards, as it might naturally be from the shot's recoil, or from Margaret's desire to aim at Mike's heart. (Nor have they been standing "very close to each other" as Van Wert states—I estimate the distance to be more than 10 feet.)

After the shot is fired, Van Wert can make no sense of Mike's angry statement "You came back like a dog to its own father," and concocts a ludicrous rationalization to bolster his theory: invert "dog" to "god" and the statement "accrues psychoanalytical import," although he declines to clarify the import of the statement "You came back like a god to its own father." (Does Van Wert actually believe that Mamet expected even the most devoted, observant, and educated filmgoer to make this impossibly abstruse connection?)

However, the point is moot, because what Mike actually says is: "You came back like a dog to its own *vomit*." If Van Wert is justifiably unclear about the relationship between dogs and their fathers, he should have no such confusion about dogs and their vomit.

The author also considers Mike's last words, "Thank you, sir. May I have another?" to be nonsense, apparently unaware that in many military and boarding schools this was once the required response of boys receiving corporal punishment, a fact that makes the speech eminently sensible, given Mike's character and situation. As he dies, Mike's body does *not* fall onto a conveyor belt, but collapses in a corner of the room.

Perhaps most importantly, Margaret does *not* leave the bag of money on the floor, as Van Wert states, but picks *her* bag up off the conveyor belt, leaving *Mike's* much larger bag on the floor. This fact completely invalidates the author's use of the loss of the money as an argument for the scene's unreality. But even if she *had* left her bag at the scene, can any reasonable viewer believe that Margaret would plan to intercept Mike, whether in a fantasy or in reality, with $250,000 in *real money*? Since we are never shown the cash in the bag, perhaps only Van Wert has been conned by this most transparent misdirection.

Van Wert also points to the fact that Margaret is not apprehended for Mike's murder as support for his interpretation. But Margaret herself supplies the reason for this as she confronts Mike: it's not her pistol (it's the one Billy Hahn turned over to her, which, unlike the one in the poker game, had to be real and loaded in order to avoid "crumbing the play" from the start), and she was never there, that is, has no connection with Mike for the police to discover. Nor are Mike's confederates likely to turn her in, even if they make the connection, for fear of being exposed themselves. To avenge a nearly perfect con, Margaret has devised a perfect murder.

Considering all these facts, it is clear that there is no substantial basis for Van Wert's bizarre reading of the scene and the film. In fact, the entire article is a classic example of criticism at its worst: using obscure refer-

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ences, labyrinthine reasoning (e.g., the twisted discourse on *Driven*, the title of Margaret's book), and obfuscating neologisms ("ludic") which are either jargon or self-coined, the author seeks to intimidate his readers under the pretext of enlightening them to deeper realities which only he has seen.

Like the Devil in *The Exorcist* who confounds his victims by mixing in some truth with his lies, Van Wert has raised a few interesting and valid points about *House of Games* but these are only touched on briefly, and are overwhelmed by the article's predominant false issues. This is unfortunate, because *House of Games* is eminently deserving of serious study and commentary. *Film Quarterly* owes its readers such an article.

Fortunately for us, in this case the critic is demonstrably wrong: he has carelessly misread and misunderstood the presumed facts on which he based his flimsy structure, and a simple examination of the film itself brings down his House of Cards. Of greater danger to readers are similarly obscurantist reviews whose fallacies are more difficult to spot, and which, like the present example, tell us considerably less about the films they supposedly examine than about their authors.

JAMES HYDER

William F. Van Wert replies:

In general, I react negatively to this sort of exchange of attack/rebuttal when I see it in print, because rhetoric usually takes over, the original article is lost in the shuffle, and egos go flailing at one another. I don't usually learn much from such an exchange. And, if I've started my response this way, it's because I want to insert the personal and show my cards right away. I was originally reluctant to make any response at all to the Hyder letter to the editor (why not to me? When I'm provoked by a piece, I write the author, not the editor), because I felt it was mean-spirited and a bit ludicrous, as opposed to ludic (likening me to the devil in *The Exorcist* . . . Indeed!). Put more seriously, I felt it was parasitic, feeding negatively off of my article rather than engendering his own article. I reasoned: if he disagrees so violently, let him write his own alternative article, let him go through the editorial process, the revision stages, the waiting for acceptance or rejection. Such a reaction would put the attention on Mamet and his film, where it is deserved, and not on two critics who disagree. Finally, I contend that taking potshots is not the same as providing an alternative *model*. Not the same at all.

But *Film Quarterly* has a forum for exchanges. They decided to print the Hyder letter and encouraged me to respond to it, so now I will respond.

I propose to move from small points to larger issues, first addressing Hyder's letter and then moving to the model I used in my analysis. In speaking of the airport scene, Hyder says that Mamet "has provided absolutely none of the usual cinematic clues that a scene is fantasy." I don't know what clues Hyder has in mind (soft-focus close-ups? a flattening of depth in cardboard backdrops?), but I am prepared to agree with Hyder, if we substitute "paranoiac space" or "phantasmagorical space" for "fantasy." This is a film about con games, and Mamet provides "tells," not clues. Clearly, it is not in the nature of the narrative structure of this film to *convince* the spectator ahead of time of the "unreality" of a scene to follow.

Hyder says I claimed the first clue that this scene is happening on the psychic stage is the first gunshot Margaret fires into Mike's leg. Not true. The first tell is the incongruity between the computer prompter for Vegas Air and the backdrop of Alaska Air Lines in a deserted airport. And there are, as I pointed out in my essay, the many verbal clues leading up to the shooting: the pitched theatricality of dialogue in which both speak, don't complete sentences, are interrupted by the other's incomplete sentences, the fast repartee of stichomythia; Margaret's insistence upon finally naming herself; her deliberate "crumbing the play" by saying she took his lucky penknife; her many accusations, including rape, most of which are false or irrational in terms of what we have seen and how they have behaved; and her seductive con of even more money, in fact all of her money, which Hyder accurately says is never shown and probably not there ("can any reasonable viewer believe that Margaret would plan to interecept Mike, whether in a fantasy or in reality, with $250,000 in *real money*?"), once again supporting my reading of the scene.

Hyder accurately points out an error I made, confusing "father" for "vomit," as in "you came back like a dog to its own vomit," I am humbled by the mistake which I, myself, caught first, but when I called *FQ* to make the correction, the issue was already at the printer's, and we decided to live with the error or, in terms of the film, to play past it. It is curious to me that my mistake does not invalidate either the model I used or the reading I gave of that airport scene, since that reading was based on the overlapping of incongruities or disparaties, the disruptions created by those incongruities, the interanimation of competing languages, utterances, "speaks" in that scene. Hyder instructs us that "Thank you, sir. May I have another?" was once the required response of boys receiving corporal punishment in many military and boarding schools, but that naturalistic explanation only enhances the fact that it is incongruous here, coming from a man with several bullets in him, supposedly about to die.

Hyder notes that Margaret tells Mike it's not her gun, but doesn't go the one step further that Margaret does: that is, she also tells Mike she wasn't even there.

With his propensity for literal reading, why doesn't Hyder read that literally? She WASN'T EVEN THERE. How's that for a clue?

Even Hyder *can't* restrict himself to a purely naturalistic reading. He says of Margaret's shooting angle: "Only now is the barrel inclined slightly upwards, as it might naturally be from the shot's recoil, or from Margaret's desire to aim at Mike's heart." Does she say this? Where or when does Margaret ever say she is aiming at Mike's heart?

Hyder concludes: "To avenge a nearly perfect con, Margaret has devised a perfect murder." If majority rules, then Hyder probably has most people on his side, for Mamet's con, I contend, rests upon our need for catharsis in the airport scene, a need which stems from the previous scene, in which we learn along with her that an entire community of men has based their economy on her, has used and abused her. We *want* the revenge of the airport scene. In the film's terminology, we give our trust over to it. But, if we believe in the naturalism of the airport scene, then we have no way to read the final scene.

Readers/viewers don't just consume texts; they construct them. The brilliance of Mamet's film resides in that invitation to co-construct, to play with our own voyeurism, suspicions, doubts, to think and rethink, read and remember backwards into the film. My essay on *House of Games* was not presented as an exclusive reading. I grant Hyder entitlement to his own reading. His desire seems to be to read the text realistically, even naturalistically, but this type of reading, it seems to me, collapses the film into a mere thriller, a kind of eye for an eye, con for con, not unlike *The Sting*. The reading I presented has the advantage of complicating the possibilities, making the film more interesting, and crediting writer-director Mamet with much more ambition and artistic guile.

It makes no sense to me at all to read the airport scene naturalistically. The one good thing Margaret learned from the bar scene was that the fake cop is still alive and she did not participate in any murder. Why, then, would she immediately run off to any real airport to commit a real murder? Why would Mamet have Mike speak the key negative words from Margaret's sessions with Darlene, a real murderer, if not to lay in a tell that Margaret does not have to be like Darlene? She has all of the resources of her occupation to effect her own talking cure, to get her revenge safely and smartly, to forgive herself of the one crime of which she is guilty (and will continue to be guilty), which is kleptomania. The con men highlight the fact that she boosted Mike's lucky penknife in the bar scene, she deliberately "crumbs the play" by acknowledging that it was his penknife in the airport scene, and then she steals the lighter in the last scene. Kleptomania is the thematic constant between the three scenes. Hyder's remarks do not address the bar scene or final scene in the restaurant, nor can they, lacking a model.

The larger issue for me is his characterization of my piece as a "classic example of criticism at its worst: using obscure reference, labyrinthine reasoning . . . and obfuscating neologisms . . . " The one example he gives of an obfuscating neologism ("ludic") strikes me as odd and amusing, because, since receiving Hyder's letter from *FQ* I have encountered the word in readings of Bakhtin, Robbe-Grillet, and Juliet Mitchell, so I want to tell him I'm not the only one using the word.

But, more generally speaking, I find it unfortunate that he sees me as an author who seeks to intimidate his readers. I can only say it's not my intention to intimidate, although it is true that many formalist models do intimidate. What I originally sent *Film Quarterly* was an article over twice the length of that which was finally published, which included a discussion of scopophilia in Freud and Lacan, some discussion of the gaze, the various behavior pairings (voyeurism with exhibitionism, for example) and their relationship to the panoply of impulse disorders as they are exhibited in clinical settings (in particular, kleptomania and arson, which are respectively "gendered" as female and male), plus an analysis of Roeg's *Bad Timing*, the voyeuristics in *Bad Timing*, and the similarities between my reading of Roeg and my reading of Mamet. In the several editing and revision stages, everything got cut out but the actual analysis of *House of Games*, including most of the allusions to the psychoanalytical model I was using. All of these cuts were done, not just for space constraints, but for readability/accessibility as well.

I, too, have been at various times extremely skeptical of the applications (when they are too literal, too derivative, or too essentialist) of Lacanian thought to film analysis. But I have been excited and delighted by the readings that such a model can yield, such as my reading of the Mamet film, a reading that would have been unavailable to me five years ago. Hyder is no doubt correct in saying that mine is a *peculiar* interpretation. I make no defense for it; in fact, I'm pleased with its particular peculiarity. It may seem even more peculiar when I say that my readings of Roeg and Mamet (and other films as well, which are to form a book) complicate them to the point of reading their final scenes as "feminist" scenes. What I am about in this work is questioning the stability of the notion of the male gaze in film (too heavily situated, I think, in examples from classic narrative cinema: i.e., Hitchcock, von Sternberg, etc.). Far from feeling obscurantist and obfuscating, this work seems to me both worthwhile and exciting.

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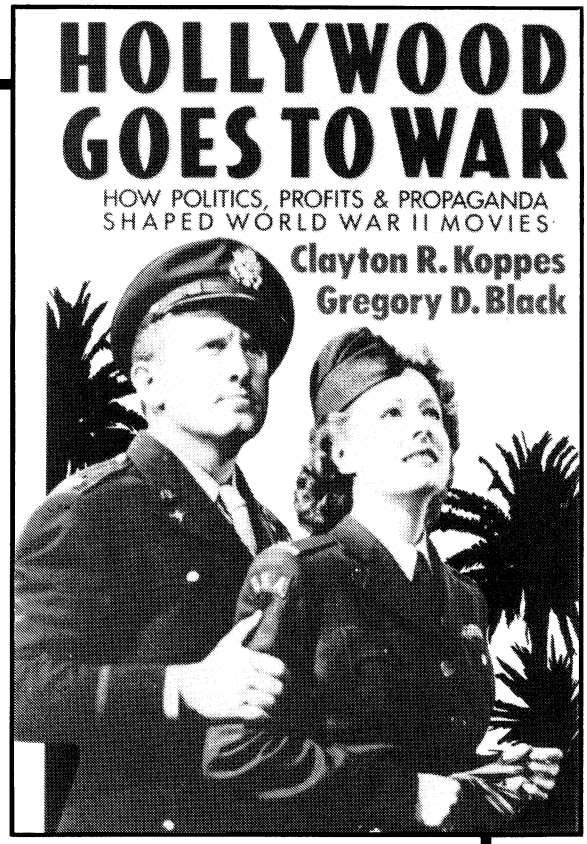

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